Interventions to Promote Peer Social Interactions in Preschool Settings

Heidi L. Hollingsworth

Young Exceptional Children 2005 9: 2
DOI: 10.1177/109625060500900101

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://yc.sagepub.com/content/9/1/2

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:
DEC
Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children

Additional services and information for Young Exceptional Children can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://yc.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://yc.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

>> Version of Record - Oct 1, 2005

What is This?
Interventions to Promote Peer Social Interactions in Preschool Settings

It is free playtime outside. Janet, a preschool teacher, observes the children playing in pairs or small groups and listens to their conversations. Through their interactions, the children are learning many skills for getting along with others. Janet is concerned because four-year-old Marie does not interact with her peers. Instead, she is wandering along the fence at the perimeter of the playground. Janet has noticed that Marie spends much of her outside playtime wandering alone. Janet has also noticed that Marie rarely interacts with her peers in the classroom. Janet knows that increased social interactions would benefit Marie, but is unsure how to encourage Marie to interact with her peers.

Promoting interactions between preschool children is an important topic because peer social interactions provide a crucial context for children's development (Brown & Conroy, 2002). For example, within social interactions with peers, children develop verbal skills and learn about how to get along with others. However, many young children experience difficulty with peer relations, particularly children with disabilities (McConnell, 2002; Rogers, 2000). Indeed, children with disabilities have problems with peer interactions beyond difficulties expected based on developmental level (Guralnick, 2001a). As the field of early childhood education has become more focused on academic issues, there has been concern among early childhood education professionals that this emphasis will result in a lack of attention to other key domains.
of development, including social development (Kauerz & McMaken, 2004), even though research indicates the importance of early social-emotional development for school success (Kauffman Early Education Exchange, 2002).

For children who have great difficulty interacting with peers, early educators must plan, implement, and monitor interventions to promote social interactions. This article describes the importance of peer social interactions for children's development and then suggests how early educators can intervene by: (1) setting up the environment, (2) teaching children social interaction skills, and (3) involving peers in social interaction interventions. Finally, general guidelines for implementing these interventions are provided.

**Rationale**

Peer-related social competence is critical for the integration of children with disabilities in the classroom and community and for children's development: "Improved social competence is likely to yield benefits for other, more fundamental developmental domains, including cognitive and communicative development as well as various forms of prosocial behavior" (Guralnick, 2001b, p. 483). Guralnick (2001b) defined peer-related social competence as children's ability to achieve their interpersonal goals. These interpersonal goals include social tasks needed for peer play, such as play entry, conflict resolution, and maintaining play. Furthermore, social integration, one of the goals of inclusion, transcends increased social interactions to the development of meaningful relationships between children with and without disabilities (Guralnick, 2001a). Social skills interventions have been found to improve peer acceptance (i.e., how well a child is liked by his or her peers), and social interaction skills in various contexts are hypothesized to be significant for the development of friendships (i.e., dyadic relationships) (Asher, Parker, & Walker, 1996). More research is needed, however, on how to improve the friendship component of social competence (Asher et al., 1996). Social competence is more than just interactions between children, but peer interactions are indeed vital for the development of children's peer-related social competence.

The remainder of this article provides examples of and specific guidelines for interventions to promote peer interactions in preschool settings. These recommendations are based on a review of the research literature indicating that classroom interventions can indeed improve the peer interactions of children, including children with disabilities (e.g., Brown & Conroy, 2002; McConnell, 2002; Rogers, 2000). The research literature focuses on children with a variety of disabilities and, in some cases, their typically developing classmates.

**Setting Up the Environment**

Although inclusive settings are associated with increased social interactions for children with disabilities, just having typically developing children in the classroom without additional interventions may not be sufficient for promoting
Although inclusive settings are associated with increased social interactions for children with disabilities, just having typically developing children in the classroom without additional interventions may not be sufficient for promoting peer interactions.

Table 1
Setting Up the Environment (Physical and Social)

- Arrange playgroups involving children with and without disabilities or by pairing a child with social interaction difficulties with a child who is socially competent (though not too much above the social level of the first child)
- Keep playgroups small (2–4 children)
- Make sure you have toys available that are likely to encourage social interactions (e.g., blocks, housekeeping props)
- Prepare sets of materials around play themes familiar to the children (e.g., post office)
- Have toys/activities in which children with social interaction difficulties are particularly interested available

Table 2
Teaching Children Social Interaction Skills

- Teach children how to engage in sociodramatic play (e.g., using play scripts)
- Teach children how to share, give compliments, and take turns by giving brief instructions, modeling what you want them to say and do, having them practice what you want them to say and do, and giving them feedback on their practice
- Prompt children to use social skills in the classroom
- Provide reinforcement for children's use of social skills
- Teach social skills to children with and without identified disabilities
- Teach social skills within the context of activities that captivate children's attention

peer interactions (McConnell, 2002; Rogers, 2000) or for improving children's social competence (Guralnick, 2001a). Recommendations for setting up the environment found in the literature (see Table 1) involve organizing the physical and social environment to encourage children's interactions with peers and include: (1) arranging playgroups, (2) using toys that encourage social interactions, (3) setting up materials around familiar play themes, and (4) using preferred toys/activities (McConnell, 2002).

These interventions are relatively easy for teachers to implement, and researchers have found positive effects of these interventions (Odom et al., 1999).

Odom and his colleagues (1999) found that arranging playgroups involving children with and without disabilities was effective in terms of promoting children's peer acceptance. When arranging small groups of children, care should be taken that the more socially competent children are not too developmentally advanced for their less competent play partners. Research has indicated that children with disabilities with higher developmental age scores who were paired with developmentally advanced play partners engaged in more social play, while children with disabilities with lower developmental age scores did not engage in as much social play when paired with a developmentally advanced partner (Skinner, Buyse, & Bailey, 2004).

Sainato and Carta (1992) noted that small group size (i.e., 2 to 3 children) and social toys (e.g., blocks, cars and trucks, dolls, housekeeping materials) are associated with increases in children's social interactions. Frea,
Craig-Unkefer, Odom, and Johnson (1999) studied social integration activities involving small teacher-arranged groups of children (i.e., one child having social difficulties and three classmates); materials around certain play themes (e.g., dress-up, doctor, dinosaurs); and teacher demonstration of how to play with the materials. This intervention was successful in increasing the rate and duration of peer interactions for a child in their study. Similarly, other researchers arranged small groups of children including children having social difficulties and socially competent children and found that this intervention was successful in improving children's peer social interactions when combined with teacher prompting (Filla, Wolery, & Anthony, 1999). Thus, environmental interventions may provide an important background for the other types of interventions.

**Teaching Children Social Interaction Skills**

The recommendations for teaching children social interaction skills presented in Table 2 are drawn from interventions that teach children skills related to playing and interacting with other children. These interventions have been successful in increasing the access of children with autism to typically developing peers and in increasing their ability to play with their peers (McConnell, 2002). Preschool-age children can be taught to engage in dramatic play using scripts for specific play roles (Rogers, 2000). For instance, children might be taught to use particular social scripts for familiar characters such as a cashier and a customer in a grocery store. An example script is provided in Table 3. For additional examples of sociodramatic play scripts, see Goldstein and Cisar (1992) and Goldstein, Wickstrom, Hoyson, Jameison, and Odom (1988).

Such play scripts can be individualized according to a child's developmental and linguistic needs (Goldstein & Cisar, 1992). In lines 3 and 4 of the grocery store script, for example (see Table 3), the customer may simply point to the cupcakes and say "Cupcakes?" or say, "What kind of cupcakes do you have today?" The baker may respond, for example, "Green and yellow," or give a more elaborate response such as "We have chocolate cupcakes with pink frosting and white cupcakes with lemon frosting and sprinkles." Such interventions can increase the social interactions of children with and without disabilities (Brown & Conroy, 2002).

Children's social interactions with peers can also be improved through group coaching of social skills such as the following:

### Table 3

**Sample Sociodramatic Play Script**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1.</strong></td>
<td>Customer: Asks cashier where to find cupcakes for a birthday party.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2.</strong></td>
<td>Cashier: Tells customer to go to the bakery and points in that direction. Tells baker this customer wants to get some cupcakes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3.</strong></td>
<td>Customer: Walks to bakery. Asks baker what kind of cupcakes are for sale.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4.</strong></td>
<td>Baker: Points to cupcakes and tells about them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5.</strong></td>
<td>Customer: Asks for the price of 12 cupcakes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6.</strong></td>
<td>Baker: States price ($10).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7.</strong></td>
<td>Customer: Requests cupcakes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>8.</strong></td>
<td>Baker: Hands cupcakes to customer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>9.</strong></td>
<td>Customer: Thanks baker.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>10.</strong></td>
<td>Baker: Responds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>11.</strong></td>
<td>Customer: Walks to cashier. Hands cupcakes to cashier.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>12.</strong></td>
<td>Cashier: States cost.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>13.</strong></td>
<td>Customer: Hands money to cashier.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>14.</strong></td>
<td>Cashier: Takes money. Wishes customer a nice day.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Characters and Setting:**
Customer, cashier, and baker in a grocery store.
Interventions should focus on specific behaviors that are key for successful peer social interactions.

as sharing and taking turns (Davis, Langone, & Malone, 1996). Group coaching, as described by Davis and colleagues, may include: (1) providing instruction on how to share; (2) modeling an example of sharing; (3) having children practice sharing with each other; and (4) providing feedback to let children know when they are doing well. Providing instruction on how to share could involve telling children about a specific instance of sharing (verbal example) and giving children a visual example of sharing by showing cartoons or pictures of children sharing. Allowing children to act out a social skill such as turn taking through role play or with puppets can be part of the process of teaching the skill (Katz & McClellan, 1997). Interventions in which children are taught social skills may also involve teacher prompting (McConnell, 2002). The adult prompting in Filla and colleagues' (1999) study included a teacher telling a child to talk to a classmate or telling a child what words to say to a classmate. In some cases, the teacher and child may want to choose a signal that the teacher can use to prompt the child to use a newly learned social skill (Katz & McClellan, 1997).

These interventions can be successful in improving how often and for how long children interact, but they may have a negative effect on how much typically developing peers like children with disabilities (Odom et al., 1999). Therefore, children with disabilities should receive social skills coaching so that children with disabilities are not singled out, and such interventions should be conducted within the context of activities or play themes that captivate children's attention. Baker, Koegel, and Koegel (1998) described an intervention that captivated children's attention by incorporating the obsessive themes of children with autism into social games that the children and their peers could play together. For example, one child was obsessed with Disney characters, so a follow-the-leader game was developed in which the leader wore a laminated picture of a Disney character. This intervention resulted in increases in appropriate social interactions for the child with autism and increases in positive affect (interest and happiness) displayed by the child and her peers.

Table 4
Involving Peers in Social Interaction Interventions

- Teach socially competent children to use incidental teaching strategies with peers (e.g., to ask a peer to name the toy he wants, give him the toy when he names it, and praise him for naming the toy).
- Let children keep track of the number of times they interact with or praise their peers (e.g., on a clipboard/chart with checks or stickers).
- Train several peers to use incidental teaching.
- Assign children buddies during centers and teach children to stay and play with their buddy, and to talk to their buddy. Change buddy assignments regularly.

In a comparative study by Odom and colleagues (1999), peer-mediated interventions were reported to be the most effective in promoting children's social interactions when considering both immediate effects.
and generalization. An example of a peer-mediated intervention that children can be taught to use is peer incidental teaching. Peer incidental teaching might occur during play when a typically developing child who has been taught to do so: (1) notices that a child with a disability wants a certain toy, (2) asks the child with a disability to name the toy, (3) gives the child the toy after it is named, and (4) praises the child for naming the toy (McGee, Almeida, Sulzer-Azaroff, & Feldman, 1992). This intervention was successful in promoting the interactions of children with disabilities and also resulted in improved peer acceptance for the children with and without disabilities involved (Odom et al., 1999). In the previous study, typically developing children were also successfully taught to self-monitor their use of incidental teaching using charts on clipboards.

In another peer-mediated intervention, Laushey and Heflin (2000) taught children with and without disabilities to use a buddy system in which they were taught to stay in the same play area and play with their assigned buddy, and to talk to their buddy while playing. This intervention resulted in increases in interactions for children with disabilities. Moreover, generalization to other peers was built into the intervention in that all the classmates were included and buddy assignments were changed daily.

Peer-mediated interventions have resulted in improvements in the social interactions of children with disabilities, but these interventions depend on the peers who are trained in the interventions, and these children may transition to different classrooms (McConnell, 2002). McConnell suggests training multiple peer exemplars as a solution to this problem. Training several peers may help children generalize recently learned social skills to new persons and situations. Likewise, changing buddy assignments regularly may help encourage children to generalize skills to numerous children (as in Laushey & Heflin, 2000). Table 4 summarizes key recommendations from the research literature for implementing peer-mediated interventions.

**Implementation Guidelines**

The guidelines provided in Table 5 may be applied to all of the above interventions for improving children's peer social interactions. To begin with, children with social interaction difficulties, particularly children with disabilities, should be the focus of attention since research has documented the social interaction difficulties of young children with disabilities (McConnell, 2002; Rogers, 2000). However, involving all children in intervention activities rather than singling out children with disabilities is recommended to prevent possible negative effects on children's peer acceptance.

Interventions should focus on specific behaviors that are key for successful peer social interactions (Brown & Conroy, 2002). Landy (2002) identified three broad categories of skills that are important for positive peer social interactions: (1) skills for play entry, (2) skills for maintaining play and forming friendships, and (3) skills for sharing and cooperating. Table 6 provides

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implementation Implementation Guidelines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Focus on children with social interaction difficulties, but do not single them out; involve all classmates in intervention activities to some degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Focus on specific behaviors key to successful peer social interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Ask parents and other teachers what social behaviors are essential to target</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Observe children to gather information on who the children interact with, how long they interact, and how well they are liked by their peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Monitor interventions and change them as needed for individual children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Try one intervention at a time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Try interventions in more than one place (e.g., encourage children to use social skills in the classroom, on the playground, and at the lunch table)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Train paraprofessionals to implement interventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Train paraprofessionals to observe children</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
more elaborated descriptions of the behaviors related to each of these broad skill categories.

In making decisions about an individual child's intervention targets, early educators should consult with the team of adults involved with the child including the family, special and general early education teachers, and any related service personnel (as in Laushey & Heflin, 2000). Each of these team members will bring different perspectives to understanding the child's current social competence as well as his or her needs for skill development to be successful across various social contexts.

In finalizing intervention targets, early educators and team members need to observe children to gather information about their current peer interactions. Interventions should focus on children's actual behaviors rather than on what adults think children should do (Rogers, 2000). Team members can compare what children do with documented developmental patterns of early peer relationships, such as the development from parallel play to simple social play, cooperative social play, sophisticated social interactions, and stable friendships: "Observations of the child's typical and highest levels of social play with peers can provide reasonable expectations when setting goals for intervention" (Guralnick, 20016, p. 488). Observation is also recommended so that the team can monitor the effectiveness of interventions for the child and make necessary adjustments, because interventions must be tailored to individual children and modified across time to reflect changes in child skills (Frea et al., 1999).

Another important intervention guideline is to try one intervention at a time, especially at first. Comprehensive or combined interventions that involve two or more interventions may not necessarily be more effective (McConnell, 2002). For example, classrooms assigned to comprehensive interventions in the Odom et al. (1999) study incorporated both environmental interventions and group social skills coaching. Results of the study showed that comprehensive interventions were not as effective as

---

Table 6

**Key Social Interaction Skills for the Preschool Child**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Skills for play entry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Observing children at play and deciding how and when to join</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Using eye contact and a pleasant tone when asking to play</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2. Skills for maintaining play and forming friendships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Listening to and conversing with other children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Negotiating and resolving conflicts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Avoiding physical aggression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Containing emotions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3. Skills for sharing and cooperating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Sharing toys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Helping other children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Taking turns in games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Taking roles in pretend play</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
might have been expected, and the authors suggested that perhaps these interventions were too demanding of teachers' time. Beginning with just one intervention is more likely to be feasible in a typical preschool setting.

Implementing an intervention in more than one place simultaneously, on the other hand, may help encourage children to generalize what they have learned to a variety of situations and may help children remember what they have learned over time. Generalization and maintenance of intervention results were noted to be problem areas by Brown and Conroy (2002). Having children practice social skills in the classroom, on the playground, on field trips, and during snacks and meals may help address these problems.

Finally, all adults working with the children, including paraprofessionals, volunteers, or other classroom helpers, should be trained to conduct the interventions and to observe children to determine how well interventions are working. Several of the research reports reviewed in preparation for this article involved the use of classroom assistants to implement interventions and/or collect data about children's behaviors (e.g., Laushey & Heflin, 2000; Storey, Smith, & Strain, 1993). Classroom assistants reported these interventions to be acceptable and feasible in the classroom (Laushey & Heflin, 2000; Storey et al., 1993). Teachers have many demands on their time and involving paraprofessionals and other adults in the classroom may help encourage the consistent use of interventions to promote children's social interactions.

**Conclusion**

Returning to the vignette, remember that Janet, Marie's preschool teacher, has recognized that Marie would benefit from increased social interactions with her peers.

After several days of observing Marie in the classroom and outdoors, Janet decides to try some interventions to promote Marie's peer social interactions. First, Janet sets up the physical and social environment. While observing, Janet notices that Marie seems to like her classmate Sondra and often watches Sondra playing with other children. Janet also knows that Marie and her classmate Kayla both have baby sisters and like to play with dolls. To set up the environment, Janet prepares a set of materials around the theme "baby's bedtime routine," and arranges for a playgroup including Marie, Sondra, and Kayla to play with the materials in the housekeeping area for some time each day.

After implementing this intervention, observing for several days, and realizing that Marie is playing with the materials but still not interacting with the other two children, Janet implements another intervention. This time, she teaches Marie, Sondra, and Kayla a sociodramatic play script relating to the theme. The script involves three characters helping each other to give Baby a bath, dress Baby in pajamas, and read a bedtime story to Baby.
Janet teaches the children the script, prompts them to use it, and praises them for doing so. During the following two weeks, Janet observes Marie interacting with Sondra and Kayla using the script. She also observes the children changing the script and adding other components such as rocking Baby and singing to Baby. Next, Janet will plan and try an intervention to promote Marie’s peer social interactions on the playground.

Janet’s implementation of interventions designed to promote Marie’s peer social interactions illustrates the various interventions and guidelines for implementation presented in this article. Through careful, systematic planning, implementation, monitoring, and modification of research-based strategies, early educators can indeed improve the peer interactions of children, including children with disabilities (McConnell, 2002).

Additional resources for intervention ideas and strategies are provided in Table 7.

Note
You can reach Heidi L. Hollingsworth by e-mail at hholling@email.unc.edu

References


Table 7

**Additional Intervention Resources**


---

Enhance your collection of paediatric resources with these popular publications from the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists!

- **Paediatric Activity Card Sort (PACS)** 2004
  Angela Mandich • Helene J. Polatajko • Linda Miller • Carolyn Baum

  Helene J. Polatajko • Angela Mandich

- **The Ludic Model: Play, Children with Physical Disabilities and Occupational Therapy** 2004
  Francine Ferland

- **Observing Children Moving (Interactive CD-ROM)** 2003
  Patricia Maude, MBE (Physical Education Association of UK Design & Production: Tacklesport (Consultancy) Limited

Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists
Phone: (800) 434-2268, ext. 242
E-mail: publications@caot.ca
Web site: www.caot.ca

---

**Volume 9 Number 1 YOUNG EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN**