

Implementing Peer Networks

Based on the work of Dr. Erik Carter*

What is a Peer Network?

A social group established around a student with a disability that:

- Meets weekly to talk, participate in a shared activity, and discuss interactions occurring outside of the group
- Helps the student become more involved in everyday school life and be more connected to other school activities
- Receives regular feedback and guidance from an adult facilitator



Goals of Peer Networks

- Increase opportunities for students to meet new peers
- Help students to develop new friendships
- Provide a space for students to practice social and communication skills
- Encourage students to be involved together in school or after-school activities
- Have fun together!
- Help peers see students with disabilities in new ways
- Raise awareness and acceptance at the school

Basic Steps...

1. Identify student(s) with a significant disability you want to start with
2. Identify a peer network facilitator (teacher, counselor, coach, etc.)
3. Identify and invite 3-6 peers to join the group
4. Hold an initial orientation meeting with the group
5. Facilitate regular peer network meetings
 - a. Arrange a mutually enjoyable activity
 - b. Check in on weekly social contacts
 - c. Encourage expansion of the network
 - d. Provide ongoing feedback and support
6. Reflect, fade, and maintain the network



Choosing Peers

Look for Peers Who...

- Interested and excited to participate in the group
- Have shared interests in common
- Motivated to develop an ongoing social relationship with the student with a disability
- Can/will stay involved through the semester
- A positive peer model for the student with a disability
- Have shared time available with the student with a disability

Kentucky Peer Support Network Project 2015

*Created from Dr. Erik Carter's Pilot Site Training for the Kentucky Peer Support Network Project (2014), and Carter, E. W., Asmus, J., Moss, C. K., Cooney, M., Weir, K., Vincent, L., & ... Fesperman, E. (2013). Peer Network Strategies to Foster Social Connections Among Adolescents With and Without Severe Disabilities. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 46(2), 51-59.



Still Struggling to Think of Peers?

- Who has shown an interest in getting to know the student in the past?
- Who has consistent attendance?
- Who seems willing to help other students?
- Who would model positive behaviors for the student?
- Who has good interpersonal skills?
- Which peers have a strong “willingness to learn” new things?
- Which peers share interests, hobbies, or activities with the student?
- Which peers are themselves “on the margins” of the school?
- Which peers are part of a larger friendship network?
- YOUR IDEAS???

Peer Network Orientation

The Purpose of the Orientation

- Students (and facilitator) learn more about each other
- Discuss the goals of the peer network
- Ask questions about the network
- Share ideas for increasing interaction with one another
- Determine when interaction could occur elsewhere during the school week
- Establish a regular meeting time during lunch period or another specified time

A Typical Orientation

- Introductions and “ice breaker”
- Discuss the goals of the group
- Address similarities and differences among group members
- Discuss confidentiality and respectful language
- Plan “out-of-meeting” connections
- Schedule regular meetings
- Closing and questions



See following pages for a Peer Network Orientation Checklist, and Weekly Meeting Agenda!

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Peer Network Orientation Checklist

Date: _____ **Location:** _____ **Facilitator:** _____

Students attending: _____

Address the following topics with students during the meeting. Support the student with a disability as needed, highlighting common interests and communication preferences.

Completed	Topic/Activity
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Introductions and background:</i> Have students introduce themselves, share their strengths and interests, and participate in a fun introductory activity as desired.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Discuss goals:</i> Share the overall goals of social group (e.g., to get to know each other and to connect throughout the school day) and the role of the facilitator.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Address any support and communication strategies:</i> Explain and model any strategies effective for conversing and/or working with the student with a disability.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Address confidentiality:</i> Discuss the importance of maintaining privacy and using respectful language.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Other expectations:</i> Review any other expectations related to the network.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Schedule social contacts:</i> Review class schedules to find natural opportunities for students to connect and identify ways to purposefully seek each other out.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Schedule regular meeting:</i> Schedule a time and place that works for the peer partners, the student with a disability, and the facilitator.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Discussion and questions:</i> Discuss what students are excited about, any concerns, questions, and what they hope to gain from this experience.

Reflections on the orientation meeting:

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Peer Network Weekly Meeting Agenda

Example of a Peer Network Meeting Agenda:

Initial Gathering (3-5 minutes)

- Students arrive
- This is a good time to ask ALL GROUP MEMBERS if they have interacted with each other outside of the meeting time
- Record this information on your *Peer Network Meeting Checklist*
- If there have been no interactions, record this on the sheet and remind the students of simple ways to connect (e.g., saying hello in the hall, walking together to a class, stopping by the classroom before or after class)

Group Activity or Conversation (15-20 minutes)

- Introduce or re-introduce activity or conversational topic
- Pass out supplies (if needed) and facilitate as appropriate, encouraging discussion and interactions
- As students engage in the activity, look for opportunities to facilitate conversation

Closing and Questions (3-5 minutes)

- Remember to ask all students if they have any questions/concerns about the group
- Remind students when the next meeting will take place and ask if everyone will be able to attend the next meeting
- Ask for ideas of activities they would like to do during the next meeting