



Peer Support Handbook

Guidance for Peer Mentors

Guiding Principles

All students belong as part of their classroom community. Belonging is about more than just being physically present in the classroom. To truly belong, a student needs to be known by their classmates, participate in class activities, and contribute to the class culture.

We are always working to **foster independence** and **promote individual dignity** for students. All students benefit from learning together with their peers. A few students may receive additional supports from a formal Peer Mentor program. The peer mentor's role is to help the student engage in their classroom in the most typical way possible. The peer mentor does not replace the teacher, and should never be a barrier between the student and their teacher or classmates.

All human relationships are two-way. A peer mentor is often in the role of leader or helper. However, the **peer mentor will also learn** important things from the student(s) they work with.

Peer mentors are students. **Peer mentor relationships require adult supervision.** Adults in the school are responsible for the safety of all students, including peer mentors.



Strategies for Peer Support (these strategies are aimed at teachers but still relevant for peers)

Identify a clear purpose for the peer during each class period

- Clarity about learning targets
- Clarity about specific tasks, accessible entry points, appropriate accommodations

Goal Setting

- Peer helps student set goals for themselves (modeling using a SMART goal framework or other goal-setting structure)
- Peer helps student review goals periodically (using data whenever possible)
- Peer and student set goals together - for the outcome of their partnership and for individual growth they will both make as a result of their partnership

Emphasis on Student Voice

- How does the peer help the student express their preferences and needs?
- How does the peer help the student contribute their ideas to the class community? (large group and small group)
- Do the teacher and other students address the student directly rather than mediating conversations through the peer?

Consider the Role of Prompts

- The goal of a peer partnership is to promote functional independence and natural social interactions
- When supporting a student, the peer should use the minimum level of prompting. (see pg. 2 for more information about Levels of Prompting)

Seating Arrangement and Structures

- Consider seating arrangements that promote student engagement in the classroom community (rather than having the student/peer sit in the back or corner of the room)
- When students are assigned to work in pairs, have the student join a partnership with another student in the class rather than with the peer

Communication Systems

- If the student uses an AAC communication device, provide instruction to the peer about how to use the device effectively, including modeling with the device, asking questions that prompt core words, appropriate wait time, acceptable approximations, honoring the words the student says through the device, and the importance of the student bringing the device with them from place to place. (see pg. 5 for more information on AAC devices)

Behavior Support

- Peers can be very effective supports to help students practice the Zones of Regulation, S'cool Moves, and other social-emotional and sensory regulation skills
- Peers modeling social-emotional and sensory regulation activities can be a great way to build engagement in students.
- Peers can help students gather data about expected behavior and regulation skills (be sure to think about dignity and confidentiality when considering having peers gather data).
- Safety is the first priority, so the peer should remove themselves from the situation and involve an adult staff member if a student is becoming aggressive or destructive.



Levels of Prompting

The peer is always working to create greater independence for the student. Consider the following levels of prompts - always aiming toward the least restrictive prompt.

Most Independent	Fully Independent	Student begins the task without prompting, perseveres through challenging parts, and completes the task.
	Natural Supports	Student looks around the environment to use the same supports that other students use to complete the task (directions on the board, posters on the wall, notes in the binder, models of other students engaged in the task, etc.)
	Gestural Prompt	Peer points to something that will help the student know what to do next (directions on the board, posters on the wall, notes in the binder, models of other students engaged in the task, manipulatives, calculator, pencil case)
	Indirect Verbal	Peer prompts the student with a general question: "What do you need to do?" "What's next?" "Did you follow all of the directions?"
	Direct Verbal	Peer gives a specific verbal direction: "Start by writing your name on the paper" "Read question #1" "Remember to put a period at the end of the sentence" "Look at the teacher"
	Model	Peer demonstrates how to do the task. Then the student does the task.
	Partial Physical Prompt	Peer gives the student a gentle nudge as a physical cue to help them get started. (Tap on the hand to remind them to pick up a pencil)
Least Independent	Full Physical Prompt	Student completes the task while the peer guides their hand or wrist. (Only use full physical prompt in rare situations)

Give as Few Prompts as Possible

- Presume competence. Believe the student can do more than they are doing now.
- Foster independence. Let the student do as much as they can without prompting.
- Use lowest level of prompting to help the student initiate and complete tasks.
- Allow the student time to observe classmates and respond to prompts. Some students take a longer time to process a prompt and act on it. If you give a second prompt while you are waiting for them to act, the new prompt may be confusing and the processing time may start over.
- Avoid developing reliance on your prompts. You will not always be around to help the student.



When using verbal prompts, the peer should guide the student back to what they do know. Starting from a foundation of confidence will help the student move forward into areas of new learning.

In math, the peer could ask questions like:

- What do you think the question is asking? What do you need to know to find the answer?
 - What are the key words?
 - What numbers do you need from the original question?
 - What operations will you need to perform?
- Do you think your answer makes sense? Can you explain to me why it makes sense?
- Would the same process work if you used a different numbers?

In social studies the peer could ask questions like:

- What do you remember about ____?
- What other people/places/concepts are connected to ____?
- What resources do you have to help you figure this out? (notes, textbook, websites, timelines or posters on the wall, etc.)

If a student is struggling with a math problem, help them identify the barriers to understanding.

- Are they having difficulty choosing which operation or algorithm to use?
- Are they having trouble identifying how to arrange the numbers in an algorithm?
- Are they having trouble with decimals/place value or units?
- Consider simplifying the numbers in the problem so the student can make sense of the process before returning to the original problem.
 - For example: “A baker has $7\frac{3}{4}$ cups of cake mix. Each cupcake takes $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups of mix. How many cupcakes can she bake?”
 - The student may identify that the operation is division, but struggle to decide which mixed number to put in which place in the division algorithm. Is it $7\frac{3}{4} \div 1\frac{1}{2}$ or $1\frac{1}{2} \div 7\frac{3}{4}$?
 - Reframing the question with simpler numbers may make it easier to conceptualize the operation: “What if the baker has 8 cups of mix and each cupcake takes 2 cups of mix? How would you arrange the numbers?”
 - The student may have a much easier time recognizing that the process is $8 \div 2$ rather than $2 \div 8$.
 - This reframing can also be helpful for guiding the student check to see if their answer is reasonable. By using 8 and 2, the student can see that the answer to the original problem will probably be something close to 4. If they originally calculated the answer to be 0.23 cupcakes, they can recognize that they probably reversed the operation.



If a student is struggling with a social studies or science concept, consider having them make a reasonable guess and then return to the question later in the activity - after they have a chance to build or activate additional background knowledge.

- Some students feel stuck and are unwilling to move on if they don't have the right answer
- Other students are happy to take a random guess and move on, regardless of whether their guess has any connection to the actual task

The peer can help the student navigate a balance between these two positions by making an educated guess and then returning to the concept later in the lesson to evaluate how accurate their original guess was. Even if the original guess was far off, the peer should promote a Growth Mindset - highlighting how our understanding grows and our original ideas can change as we acquire new information.

Remember that *Productive Struggle* is essential to building confidence and competence. If students never struggle to understand a concept, they may never build the belief that they can learn and do hard things.

Help Students Create Authentic Work

- Students learn when they actively participate in classroom activities alongside their classmates - engaging in the same tasks as their classmates whenever possible
- ***Avoid completing assignments, taking tests, answering questions or speaking for students***
- For some students, the peer may assist with writing/scribing the student's ideas. Consult with the teacher to see if scribing is appropriate for the student.

Study Strategies

- The peer can help the student generate memory devices to remember key ideas, vocabulary, etc.
- Consider a variety of strategies for studying - flash cards, drawing/cartooning, creating rhymes, acronyms, acting out ideas or concepts, etc.
- Use a highlighter to focus on important words in the directions or key vocabulary words
- Use blank paper or blank note cards to cover up portions of the page so the student only sees one task at a time. This can be particularly helpful for students who get easily distracted by excess information on the page. This can also be helpful for students who get overwhelmed by the idea of completing a full page of work. Seeing only one step at a time can free up mental energy to allow the student to focus on the current task.



Communication Devices*

Think of an AAC Communication Device as a student's voice. The device should always be within arm's reach so the student can initiate communication. If you can see the student, you should also be able to see their AAC device. (AAC = Alternative and Augmentative Communication)

Teachers and peers should never turn off or mute the communication device. It is ok to adjust the volume to match the acceptable volume for other student voices in the room (loud, standard volume, whisper)

When a student is learning to use an AAC device, it is like learning another language. The only way to become proficient is to use the language over and over.

- We expect the student to make mistakes. Saying unexpected words through an AAC device is a playful way for the student to understand how the icons on the device make sounds that relate to ideas.
- Approximations are acceptable. A one or two word statement may be a good way for a student to start using the language. Don't require students to use grammatically complete sentences until they have become much more proficient with the device.

How you talk to a student who uses an AAC Device makes a big difference:

1. Narrate what you are thinking and doing.
2. Avoid asking lots of questions. Allow wait time for a student to formulate a thought and find the icons to answer the question.
3. Describe what you are doing and use the device to model. Peers should tap or point to the icons when they are speaking. Don't worry if you don't know where everything is. Peers and students will learn together. Be sure the student is comfortable with you holding or using the device.
4. Use a conversational tone and natural humor. Talk to the student the same way you would talk to any student their age. A student who doesn't use verbal language should still be involved in conversations about things their classmates like to talk about.
5. Think about Engagement. What would the student want to talk to you about? Use the device while playing games and interacting socially. This will encourage the student to use the device.

Students who use an AAC device are often underestimated because they have a different communication system. Be sure to have high expectations:

1. Set the Bar High
2. Provide Support & Guidance
3. Engage the Student in High Quality Instructional Tasks or Meaningful Social Interactions
4. Focus on Progress, not Perfection

*many of the strategies on this page come from *Everyone Deserves a Voice: AAC Strategies for Success* from www.PrAACticalAAC.org



Safety, Dignity and Confidentiality

When providing support to a student, it is important for peer mentors to think about Safety, Dignity and Confidentiality.

Safety

All students want to do well in school, make friends, and engage safely in the school community. Some students experience social-emotional, cognitive, or communication challenges that make it more difficult for them to participate safely throughout the school day.

Teachers and parents are helping the student learn the skills to be safe.

- Sometimes unsafe actions result when a student experiences *high levels of frustration or anxiety* about a difficult academic task.
- Sometimes students will do something unsafe if they don't have a more effective way of *communicating their needs* or they don't feel like people are listening to them.
- Sometimes unsafe actions happen when a student is facing a *change in routine*, they don't know how to navigate a *complex social situation*, or they are afraid about an *unpredictable future*.

There are two key elements for teachers and peers in all of these examples:

1. **Safety** - The first responsibility for the peer is to maintain your own safety. If you are working with a student who is exhibiting unsafe behaviors, make sure that you remove yourself from the situation and avoid words or actions that may escalate the situation. Sometimes a calming word or reassuring gesture from a peer can be helpful (like asking the student to identify their Zone of Regulation). But if a student is in a state of high escalation, make sure you maintain a safe distance, and ask an adult to help the student regulate their emotional state. You should never grab or hold a student who is being aggressive or destructive.
2. **Learning** - Students who demonstrate unsafe behaviors are working on learning the self-regulation and communication skills to be able to engage in class safely. As a peer, you can help the student practice these skills when they are in a calm, regulated state.

Dignity

Students who receive support from a peer mentor are members of the school and classroom community just like any other student. They have valuable things to contribute; the peer mentor should be open to learning from them.

Occasionally, students may say or do things that are unexpected or socially inappropriate. As a peer, think about the way your interactions with the student can promote dignity and draw attention to their positive contributions to the class. If a student has said or done something that makes other students uncomfortable, talk to a teacher about ways that you can help the student repair their relationships and restore their dignity. Avoid words or actions that might put the student in a position to be ridiculed or bullied by other classmates.



Some students require adult support to use the bathroom. Peers can encourage students toward bathroom independence, but they should never assist with toileting or changing routines.

Confidentiality

As a peer mentor, the students you work with are trusting you to help them navigate the complex academic and social demands of the classroom. You may learn personal or private things about a student. You have a responsibility to maintain confidentiality for the student. That means, it is not ok to share stories with your friends about things that students say or do while you are working as a peer mentor.

Joy & Belonging

School should be a joyful place where all students feel a sense of true belonging. As you work with students as a peer mentor, consider ways to help students experience joy and make meaningful contributions to their classroom community.



Peer Mentor Agreement

Peer Mentor Name: _____ School: _____

Goal Setting

As a Peer Mentor, I hope to learn: _____

My goals for the student(s) I work with: _____

If I am uncertain about how to help a student, or if I am concerned about safety, I will talk to: _____

As a Peer Mentor I will abide by these agreements:

1. I am committed to promoting academic and social engagement for the student(s) I work with.
2. I will seek to learn from the student(s) I work with, in addition to supporting their learning.
3. I will remove myself from unsafe situations and involve a teacher or other school staff member to help the student(s). If I suspect that a student is being bullied or is at risk of being hurt or hurting others, I will report to school staff immediately.
4. I will protect the dignity and confidentiality of the student(s) I work with by encouraging positive social interactions and not sharing private or personal information about the student(s) with any other students or friends.

X _____

Peer Mentor Signature and Date

Parent Agreement: I acknowledge that my child will participate as a Peer Mentor as described in the Peer Mentor Handbook.

X _____

Peer Mentor Parent Signature and Date