

Promoting Communication and Peer Relationships for Students Learning to Use AAC

Elizabeth E. Biggs, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Department of Special Education
Vanderbilt University



1

Introduction



Elizabeth E. Biggs, PhD

- **Assistant Professor**
Department of Special Education at Vanderbilt University
- **Affiliated Member**
Vanderbilt Kennedy Center
- **Faculty Member**
Vanderbilt Consortium Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities (LEND)

2

Speaker Disclosures

Content for this presentation has been informed by a multi-year research project funded by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), titled:

"Enhancing Peer Network Interventions to Improve Social Communication, Play, and Peer Relationships for Minimally Verbal Students with Autism" (#R324B210004)

3

Objectives

By the end of the session, you should be able to:

- Describe the importance of peer relationships for belonging and inclusion
- Identify facilitators and barriers of peer engagement and relationships in your school
- Have tools to collaborate so that you can promote social communication and peer relationships for students through a peer network intervention

4

Who are Students with Complex Communication Needs?

5

Who are students with complex communication needs?

Students with complex communication needs are nonspeaking or have limited use of functional verbal speech.

In other words, they are unable to use verbal speech to meet their day-to-day communication needs
(Beukelman & Light, 2020)

6

Who are students with complex communication needs?

Students with complex communication needs...

- Comprise about one-third to one-half of students with IDD who qualify as students with "significant cognitive disabilities" (Erickson & Geist, 2016; Towles-Reeves et al., 2009)
- Often have autism, intellectual disability, and/or multiple disabilities (Andzik et al., 2018; Erickson & Geist, 2016)
- Are more likely to have co-occurring motor and sensory impairments than students with IDD who do not have complex communication needs (Erickson & Geist, 2016)
- Often have inadequate access to aided augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) (Towles-Reeves et al., 2012; Kleinert, 2020)
- Are substantially more likely to be placed in segregated settings than other students with IDD who use speech to communicate (Erickson & Geist, 2016; Kleinert et al., 2015; Kleinert, 2020)

7

What is Aided Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)



Any tool, whether electronic or non-electronic, that can be used to support communication instead of or alongside speech

Examples include:

- Picture symbols
- Dedicated speech-generating devices
- AAC applications on iPads or other similar devices

8

What is the Enhancing Peer Network Project?

Foster inclusive school environments,

so that elementary-aged students with autism who have complex communication needs can:

- Build social and communication skills **while**
- Developing mutual relationships with their peers



9

The Importance of Friendship and Peer Interaction

10

What does "friendship" mean to you? Why is friendship important for everyone?

11

Did you know?

Secondary students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) may have no interactions with peers
1 out of every 4 days
... even when they are 'included' (present) in general education classrooms

(Calle et al. 2008)

12

Did you know?

Secondary students with developmental disabilities (AAC) may have no interactions with peers 1 out of every 4 days—even when they are included—in general education classrooms.

Only 3%
Of interactions for elementary aged students who use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) are with peers

(Andzik et al., 2016)

13

So then, what does it mean for students with complex communication needs to be truly *included* in their school communities?



14



To be included means to belong



<https://tiescenter.org/topics/peer-engagement/creating-communities-of-belonging-for-students-with-significant-cognitive-disabilities>

15

What are some “truths” about children’s friendships that adults should know?

16

What are some “truths” about children’s friendships that adults should know?

1. Friendship can’t be forced– “**I choose you and you choose me**”.

“My teachers should know that it’s a really, a strong friendship that we have. And he’s just around, like more than my other friends. And he can, just, I feel safe around Jeremy for some reason”

• 9-year-old Iris about her friend Jeremy (who had autism and Down syndrome)

17

What are some “truths” about children’s friendships that adults should know?

1. Friendship can’t be forced– “**I choose you and you choose me**.”
2. Friendship can be fostered– **what we do as adults matters**.

18

Key Agents for Friendship Development

Children say these things are important for them to become friends (and become better friends):



Spending time doing things together



Being able to communicate with and understand one another



Learning about one another
(Personalities, not disability labels)



Having other friends in common

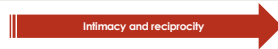
19

What are some “truths” about children’s friendships that adults should know?

1. Friendship can't be forced– “I choose you and you choose me.”
2. Friendship can be fostered– what we do as adults matters.
3. Friendship can be hindered– don't inadvertently create or reinforce “helping” relationships.

20

Peers’ Understanding of Disability Shapes their Relationships with Classmates with Disabilities



“Helping” Relationships (Deficit-Focused View of their Friend with a Disability)

“Well, I knew [Joanna] had a disability and I just wanted to help because when I get older, I probably wanna help disability kids all around the world.” – Anna (9 years)

Reciprocal Friendships (Strengths-Based View of their Friend with a Disability)

“Not all of my friends need special care, so he's different than them. But he's really fun and artistic. ... Not everyone's the same because not everybody's good at the same things” – Aiysha (10 years)

21

“If you want to be friends with [Joanna], you don't do it by helping her or anything like that. When you start to become friends with her, then you can do that.”

- 9-year-old Caty about her friend Joanna (who had autism)

22

So what do these “truths” mean for educators, parents, etc.?

We need to support children to be able to:

- Focus on their friend's strengths, not just what is challenging
- Have a way to communicate together (even if it isn't “words”)
- Have things they like to do together, and do them often
- Learn about each other– personalities, not disability labels
- Have other friends in common (a “network”)
- Have from adults to navigate challenges

23

**Let's take a pause...
Questions? Reactions?**



24



25

Challenges to Positive Peer Interaction and Relationships

Being in the same physical space is not sufficient to support positive interactions and relationships with peers.
(Andzik et al., 2016; Chung et al., 2012)

Challenges and facilitators can come from:

- Student social and communication skills
- School environment
- Peers' attitudes, interactions, and confidence

26

What are educator roles in addressing these challenges?

Student social and communication skills

Educators should:

- Ensure students have reliable ways of communicating (e.g., speech, signs, aided AAC)
- Identify peers the student wants to get to know or likes to spend time with
- Ensure AAC supports are set up for peer interaction and relationships
- Teach social communication in meaningful, natural contexts

27

What are educator roles in addressing these challenges?

School environment

Educators should:

- Ensure general education settings are physically accessible for all students
- Create and support opportunities for students with and without disabilities to do things together
- Don't rely too much on individually assigned adult support
- Find activities that students and peers both enjoy

28

What are educator roles in addressing these challenges?

Peer attitudes, interactions, and confidence

Educators should:

- Actively involve students with and without disabilities in making their school a place of belonging for everyone
- Make sure that other students don't think disability is a "bad word"
- Teach about neurodiversity and disability using strengths-based models
- Equip peers to know how to be effective communication partners with classmates with complex communication needs

29

Handout

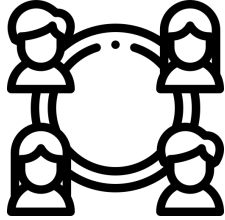
Page 1

Page 2

Page 3

30

Let's spend some time talking together...



31

Directions for Small Group Discussions (12 minutes, and then we will report back together)

1. **Get into groups**
 - About 4-7 people per group
 - If remote, will be placed in a Zoom breakout
2. **Designate a facilitator/spokesperson**
 - This person can help conversation flow, and will share a few key take-aways with our large group
3. **Discuss (use the handout if you can!)**
 - What is going well in your schools related to supporting interactions, engagement, and relationships with peers?
 - Where is there room for improvement related to supporting interactions, engagement, and relationships with peers?
 - How do these things (i.e., what is going well and what is challenging) relate to these categories we have been discussing– that is, factors related to **students**, the **school environment**, and **peers**).
4. **Come back together to share (about 1-2 min per group)**

32

Let's hear from you!
(Just the highlights– nothing long-winded)

- What is going well in your schools related to supporting interactions, engagement, and relationships with peers?
- Where is there room for improvement related to supporting interactions, engagement, and relationships with peers?
- How do these things (i.e., what is going well and what is challenging) relate to these categories we have been discussing– that is, factors related to **students**, the **school environment**, and **peers**).

33

Promoting Communication and Engagement with Peers

34

Three Steps to Promoting Communication and Engagement with Peers at the Elementary Level

1. **Engage students in social-emotional learning**
Explicitly teach friendship, belonging, acceptance, and neurodiversity/disability inclusion
2. **Establish “Peer Networks”**
3. **Teach peers “Ways to Talk and Play” within the peer networks**

35

Three Steps to Promoting Communication and Engagement with Peers at the Elementary Level

1. **Engage students in social-emotional learning**
Explicitly teach friendship, belonging, acceptance, and neurodiversity/disability inclusion
2. **Establish “Peer Networks”**
3. **Teach peers “Ways to Talk and Play” within the peer networks**

36

What is meant by Social-Emotional Teaching?

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process for all students to be able to acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to...

- Develop healthy self-identity
- Manage emotions
- Achieve personal and collective goals
- Show empathy for others
- Establish and maintain supportive relationships
- Make responsible and caring decisions

37

Including topics such as...

Friendship

Acceptance

Belonging

Diversity

Inclusion

Disability and Neurodiversity

38

Friendships
shape the way
children think
about disability.

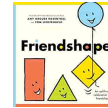
and

The way children
think about
disability shapes
their relationships.

39

Utilizing Children's Literature for Social-Emotional Learning

Friendship and Belonging



Diversity and Inclusion



Disability and Neurodiversity



40

Teaching Social-Emotional Concepts Using Children's Literature

Pre Reading

- Clearly explain the social-emotional learning objective
- Pre-teach vocabulary
- Introduce the book

During Reading

Make the reading interactive using:

- Think-aloud strategies
- Discussion questions
- Scaffolding and multiple response options for students with disabilities

Post Reading

- Recap the key learning objective
- Provide a meaningful way for students to respond
- Provide a call to action

41

Example- When Charley Met Emma

Lesson Information

Book title: When Charley Met Emma

Author: Amy Webb

Topic: How can we celebrate the ways we are similar and different?

Lesson objective: Students will be able to (a) make meaning of disability as an aspect of diversity and (b) celebrate the similarities and differences of their friends.

Recommended grades: K-3rd



42

Example- When Charley Met Emma

Pre Reading

Clear explanation: Introduce the book and provide a brief explanation about how people can be the same and different, and that this should be celebrated

Sample student-friendly definition

Pre-teach vocabulary
Teach the word "disability" using student-friendly definitions, visuals, and aided AAC modeling of key words

Engaging question
What does it mean to have a disability? How can we celebrate similarities and differences?



Disability

A difference with a person's brain or body. The difference might mean the person does day-to-day things in a different way.



43

Example- When Charley Met Emma

During Reading

Page of the book

"One day Charlie and his mother went to the park..."

"... Why does she look so weird, Mommy?"

"I also don't like it when people point..."

"... Do you ever feel different, Charlie?"

"I even like to play tag with friends."

Prompt for Teacher

Discussion: What do you notice about the girl that Charlie sees?
(Build on student responses and encourage/model person-first language)

Discussion: Do you think that was a nice way to talk about the girl? How do you think the girl felt when she heard what Charlie said?

Discussion: Raise your hand if you also don't like it when people point, laugh, stare, or whisper about you. How does it make you feel?

Discussion: Are there ways that you are different than your friends? Do you ever feel different?

(Help students realize it is not just related to disability. They might look different, do things differently, or like different things)

Think aloud: Provide a reminder about what confidence means

Discussion: What do you have in common with Emma?



44

Example- When Charley Met Emma

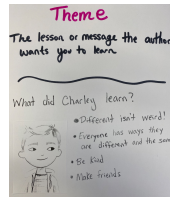
Post Reading

Recap: Provide a summary of what the students learned about disability and differences

Sample chart from the activity with students

Way to respond: Teach about "theme". Then, discuss the theme of the story together and create a chart to provide a visual of students' ideas.

Wrap-up and call to action: Remind students that differences make us special, but that we can always find things in common. We should be kind to everyone!



45

Supporting Family-School Partnerships

Building a Foundation for Healthy Peer Relationships through Children's Literature

Book Title: *When Charley Met Emma*

By Amy Webb



Book Summary:

★ Today we read a book where the character, Charley, met a new friend named Emma. Emma had a disability. We talked about how a disability is a difference with a person's brain or body that means they do something differently. We also talked about celebrating the ways that people are both similar and different.

Support this lesson at home:

- ★ Help your child know that disability isn't a "bad word" or something that is wrong to talk about. Talk about different types of disabilities using clear, positive language.
- ★ Model and encourage kindness. Help your child know to never use hurtful words like "weird" or "creepy" to describe people with disabilities.
- ★ Emphasize that every person is good at something. Help your child see the strengths of people with disabilities.

Questions?
To learn more about this initiative, contact your child's teacher or the Vanderbilt University team: biggs@vanderbilt.edu



Talk with your child:

- ★ What did you learn from reading the book about Charley and Emma?
- ★ How do you feel when you are around other kids who might be different than you? Have you found things that you have in common?

To view the book read aloud, scan here with the camera of your phone.



46

Summarizing What We've Learned Social-Emotional Learning

Social-emotional learning (SEL)

Empowers students and educators to co-create communities of belonging together

Students with and without disabilities

Benefit from learning key social-emotional concepts together (e.g., friendship, acceptance, belonging, diversity)

Peers without disabilities

Can build positive understandings of disability and neurodiversity through conversations and direct teaching

Educational teams

Can collaborate and utilize children's literature to plan lessons and units that systematically teach social-emotional concepts

47

Three Steps to Promoting Communication and Engagement with Peers at the Elementary Level

1. **Engage students in social-emotional learning**
Explicitly teach friendship, belonging, acceptance, and neurodiversity/disability inclusion
2. **Establish "Peer Networks"**
3. **Teach peers "Ways to Talk and Play" within the peer networks**

48

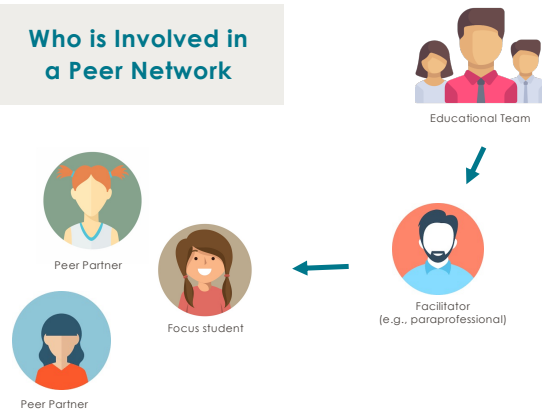
What is a Peer Network Intervention?

Evidence-based intervention to support peer interactions and relationships:

- The student and peers form the "peer network" (about 2-3 peers)
- The group meets regularly to play (about 3x week for 15 min or so)
- Interactions are encouraged outside of the network times too!
- An adult provides support to the network

49

Who is Involved in a Peer Network



50

Planning for Peer Networks

Educational teams should collaborate to determine:

- Who will facilitate (i.e., the adult)?
- Which peers should be invited?
- When will the network meetings be held? How long will they be?
- What will be the shared social "activity"?

51

Play Menu

To identify toys that everyone will enjoy:

1. Gather data about the preferences of the focus student
2. Create a "play menu"
3. Give to peers (have them circle things they like)
4. At each peer network, have at least two different play sets!

See the toys below. Circle all the toys you would have fun playing with during the Peer Network. Name: _____

| | | | |
|-----------------|-------------|----------------|-----------|
| Car and monster | Animals | Block set | Playdough |
| Dinosaurs | Water beads | Marbles | Play tent |
| Marble tracks | Legos | Playdough sets | |

52

Implementing Peer Network Interventions

The adult facilitator should...

- Coach students to play in ways that include everyone
- Model and teach ways of interacting that scaffold engagement and interactions
- Check-in regularly with the student and peers to hear how they think things are going
- Fade physical proximity and involvement over time

53

'Just right' support: Provide support in a way that avoid inserting yourself too deeply or directly into the "separate social world" of children who are friends
(Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003)



54

Summarizing What We've Learned Building Peer Networks

| | |
|------------------------------|--|
| Peer Networks | Are groups with the student and a few peers, who meet together regularly to play |
| Play menus | Can help educational teams identify play activities that the student and peers will enjoy |
| The adult facilitator | Has important roles coaching students in the peer network, and fading support over time |

55

Three Steps to Promoting Communication and Engagement with Peers at the Elementary Level

1. **Engage students in social-emotional learning**
Explicitly teach friendship, belonging, acceptance, and neurodiversity/disability inclusion
2. **Establish "Peer Networks"**
3. **Teach peers "Ways to Talk and Play" within the peer networks**

56

What is meant by "Ways to Talk and Play"?

"Ways to Talk and Play" are simple strategies that help peers learn to scaffold joint engagement, play, and communication by:

- Following the lead of their classmate with a disability
- Taking turns in play (copying and modeling play)
- Modeling salient language, including by using AAC
- Noticing all the ways their friend communicates (and responding!)

57

"Ways to Talk and Play" So that it's fun for everyone!



Copy-Talk

1. **Copy:** Watch your friend to see how they like to play. Do what they do with similar toys.
2. **Talk:** Say something about what you and your friend are doing.



Play-Talk-Give

1. **Play:** Show your friend a cool way that you like to play.
2. **Talk:** Say something about what you are doing.
3. **Give:** Give your friend a similar toy and invite them to take a turn.



Respond

1. **Watch, Listen, and Notice:** Look for all the ways your friend communicates—speech, the communication device, pointing or body movements.
2. **Respond:** Say something back to your friend. Stay on the same topic that they brought up.

58

Teaching Peers to use aided AAC too!

Peers' use of aided AAC is called by many different names in research literature (e.g., **aided language modeling**, **aided language stimulation**, **AAC modeling**)



Having peers use the AAC device during the "Ways to Talk and Play"...

- Demonstrates that the aided AAC device is useful for communication
- Models language using the aided AAC device without putting peers in "teaching" roles

59

Copy-Talk

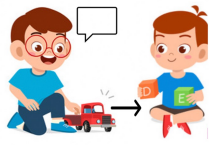


Copy-Talk

1. **Copy:** Watch your friend to see how they like to play. Do what they do with similar toys.
2. **Talk:** Say something about what you and your friend are doing.

60

Play-Talk-Give



Play-Talk-Give

1. **Play:** Show your friend a cool way that you like to play.
2. **Talk:** Say something about what you are doing.
3. **Give:** Give your friend a similar toy and invite them to take a turn.

61

Respond



Respond

1. **Watch, Listen, and Notice:** Look for all the ways your friend communicates—speech, the communication device, pointing or body movements.
2. **Respond:** Say something back to your friend. Stay on the same topic that they brought up.

62

Key Tips for Teaching Peers the “Ways to Talk and Play”

Teaching Session

- Explain the strategy
- Give a student-friendly rationale
- Use a visual as a memory aid
- Video models of the strategy
- Role play

Play with Coaching

- Display visual (memory aid)
- Brainstorm examples together with peers
- Identify target words for the AAC device
- Play with students to model the strategies
- Fade support

63

“The ways to talk and play are easy now. I’ve learned how to communicate with Hector easier, instead of just like talking to him and him not knowing what I’m talking about, or to have Hector just still playing by himself. If I use play-talk give or copy-talk or respond, he’ll respond— well, sometimes he’ll respond and sometimes he won’t and that’s just fine— but I can just grab the same kind of toy that he’s playing with, if he doesn’t want to play with the toy that I give him.”

- 8-year-old Addison

64

To Summarize— Three Steps to Promoting Communication and Engagement with Peers

1. **Engage students in social-emotional learning**
Explicitly teach friendship, belonging, acceptance, and neurodiversity/disability inclusion
2. **Establish “Peer Networks”**
3. **Teach peers “Ways to Talk and Play” within the peer networks**

65

Some Final Tips on Supporting Peer Engagement and Relationships

66

This is a lot to think about! So what now?

1. Start one step at a time
2. Reflect collaboratively with other educators to identify key priorities
3. Involve the student and peers! (Co-create communities of belonging in your school)

67

**"We play a lot more together.
And we play better. Because
before, at recess, Hector would
go do something by himself, and
me and Addison, we would go do
something together. But after we
started playing in here, we all
play together."**

- 9-year-old Jaliyah

68

Wrap-Up

Today you learned...

- Reasons peer relationships are crucial for belonging and inclusion
- How to identify facilitators and barriers of peer engagement and relationships in your school
- Tools and strategies to promote social communication and peer relationships for elementary-aged students with disabilities and their peers

69

Questions?



Thank you!

Elizabeth E. Biggs, PhD
elizabeth.e.biggs@vanderbilt.edu

Check out these additional (free) resources!

Creating Communities
of Belonging



Peer Network
Interventions



70