

The Power of Peers

***Supporting Students With Social Communication
Challenges by Empowering Others to Assist***

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*Let's Look Ahead so we Know What to
do Right Now!*

**Looking at the Importance of Adaptive
Functioning Skills and Their Critical Impact
on Outcomes for Those With ASD**

Building Independence

It is imperative that inclusive education means not only the practice of placing students with special needs in the regular classroom, but ensuring that teachers and others assist every student to prepare for the highest degree of independence possible

How do we Build Independence?

- By taking a critical look at adaptive functioning
- By incorporating generalization into all program planning
- By maintaining a long term perspective on independence

“The ultimate goal is to enable our students to develop increasing independence, over time”

Adaptive Behaviours

- Age appropriate behaviours necessary for people to live independently and to function safely and appropriately in daily life
- It is necessary for students with ASD to receive explicit instruction to learn adaptive behaviours, as they do not tend to learn them on their own, over time

The Four Corners of Adaptive Functioning

Communication:

- Receptive
- Expressive
- Written

Socialization:

- Interpersonal relationships
- Play and leisure
- Coping skills

Daily Living:

- Personal
- Domestic
- Community

Motor Skills:

- Gross
- Fine

Adult Outcomes

- Are influenced by the acquisition of adaptive skills
- It is not an overstatement to say that adaptive skills competencies will get you through times of no academic skills better than academic skills will get you through times of no adaptive skills competencies

Adult Study

In 2005 Dr. Deborah Ellison (from CPRI, London, ON) conducted a study of adults with ASD

The age range was **18 – 30** years of age

Diagnosis: **2/3** did not have classic autism

1/3 classic autism

Adult Study

The adults in the study reported that independent living was a **high** priority for them

Results of the Adult Study

82% were still living at home

- Limited access to residential options
- Lacking skills to live independently

Results of the Adult Study

41 % were employed for an average of 14.5 hours per week

Reasons for low employment numbers:

- **High levels of anxiety**
- **Lack of skills for work**

Results of the Adult Study

Advice from the parents of the adults in the study:



Focus treatment and education on developing life skills and adaptive functioning skills for the *real world*

What Does All of This Mean?

Regardless of intellectual abilities, the greatest barrier to achieving independence lies in the deficits in adaptive functioning

The good news is we CAN teach these skills and our students CAN learn them

We need to begin early and get others to help!

Let's Focus on One Area of Adaptive Functioning

Social Skills: The Power of Peers



How Inclusive Education Sets the Stage

- Helps Children to understand likeness/differences
- Teaches children not to fear differences
- Contributes to the development of empathy and caring
- Helps children recognize the signs of distress
- Encourages children to include peers with ASD, in their play
- Encourages children to model appropriate social skills
- Encourages children to develop relationships with all of their peers

A Peer Mediated Approach

- Environmental inclusion alone with typically developing peers is not significant in increasing social interactions for children with social communication challenges
- Peer-mediated intervention has been shown to be one of the most researched, effective methods for increasing social interactions
- Peer-mediated intervention is an intentional approach to working with typically developing children and empowering them to teach their peers with ASD.

This is what I call the *Power of Peers!*

- Typically developing children are a natural resource in schools and we tend to underutilize them

Why are Typically Developing Peers so Powerful?

- Typically developing children know age-appropriate social skills
- Rather than having adults working with students with ASD to teach them social skills, we focus on the “other side of the social communication equation” and have the adults teach typical peers the social interaction skills. They in turn, teach those with ASD
- Everyone wins because *ALL* children in the environment develop better social skills
- This approach promotes *relationship building* and *community*

Research Shows Overreliance on Adults Leads to:

- Separation from classmates
- Interference with peer interactions
- Insular relationships between the adult providing support and the student
 - Unnecessary dependence on adults
 - A feeling of being stigmatized
 - Interference with teacher engagement
 - Limited access to competent instruction
 - Loss of personal control
 - Loss of gender identity
 - Provocation of behaviour problems

What Does the Research Say?

- Support that encourages independence and interdependence best prepares our students with ASD for life outside of school and gives them access to greater opportunities whether in an independent living situation, a job, or the type of residential home an individual may access
- Never underestimate the “Power of Peers” as one of the ways to teach social skills; a critical adaptive skill which leads to greater independence

What Outcomes Can We Hope For?

- Outcomes build upon each other
- Independence is realized by increments
- Greater independence leads to greater opportunities
- Our moral imperative is to prepare our students to achieve their highest potential in order to realize those opportunities
- The sky is the limit!



What Can You do as Parents?

- Encourage and support your child's siblings, cousins and/or friends of the family to help, by teaching them to be "peer prompters"
- Look for as many opportunities to practice social skills in as many natural environments as possible
- Our children with *ASD require significantly more opportunities* to learn skills than their typical peers
- Generalization must always be planned for, as skills learned in one environment with one person do not automatically transfer to others

Consider an I Do, We Do, You Do Approach

- Begin by showing your child's peer how to give a prompt, take turns in a game or ask your child to play by modelling it yourself – I do
- Take on the roll of facilitator or coach, rather than leader and remain in the learning equation, “coaching” the peer until they've got it – we do
- Move to allowing the peer to run the show, while remaining off to the side, or in the background – you do

Dr. Peter Gharhardt Has Devoted More Than 35 Years to Working With Adolescents and Adults With ASD

- This matters because very few people have focused on this population as most professionals are far more interested in early intervention and in working with young children
- We absolutely must know what goes on at the other end of the age spectrum, as it informs what we need to be doing now, in order to improve outcomes
- Dr. Gerhardt advocates for a model of asking yourself what you hope for your child 10 years out and 5 years out, and to begin planning backwards, to achieve these things
- In other words, if you hope for ----, we need to work on ----

Consider This...

While social skills intervention needs to begin soon after diagnosis, social skills intervention remains important over the lifespan. This is of particular significance given that the social deficits associated with ASD do not resolve with development and may, in fact, be more pronounced given the normative social repertoire of typical peers

Quality of Life

Not Life, but **good** life, is to be chiefly valued

Socrates

Those with ASD, though perhaps not as socially motivated as those who are typically developing, are nevertheless human and by virtue of that fact alone, deserve explicit support to gain greater social competence, leading in part, to a greater quality of life



Questions?