

Chapter 1

Peer Tutor Training Kit: An Introduction



Perhaps the most pressing challenge that schools face is one of ensuring that all children become competent readers. Young children who experience problems in reading quickly fall behind their more skilled classmates in their ability to decode and comprehend text. This gap in reading skills can emerge as early as first grade—and, once present, tends to be quite stable over time. First-grade teachers can predict with some confidence, for example, that those children in their classrooms with significant reading deficits by the end of the school year will very likely have continuing difficulties in reading in the fourth grade.

Linking Gaps in Reading to Opportunities for Practice

A major explanation for why poor readers lag so far behind typical readers in the same classroom is ...lack of practice. Skilled readers tend to enjoy reading and to have lots of opportunities to use their reading skills independently. Poor readers, on the other hand, are likely to find reading to be difficult and frustrating. Not surprisingly, they avoid reading and therefore seldom practice to improve their literacy skills. The difference in ability between competent and less-able readers may be relatively minor in the early primary grades. However, good readers quickly sail far past poor readers, propelled by the momentum of continual reading practice (Stanovich, 1986).

Peer Tutoring: A Simple Prescription to Help Struggling Readers

While the long-term negative impact of poor readers can be enormous, the good news is that schools can train their own students to deliver effective tutoring in reading to younger peers. *Kids as Reading Helpers: A Peer Tutor Training Manual* is a complete package for training peer reading tutors. Peer tutoring answers the nagging problem of delivering effective reading support to the many struggling young readers in our schools. Furthermore, peer-tutoring programs can improve the reading skills of tutors as well as tutees (Ehly, 1986) and – in some studies—have been shown to build tutor's social skills as well (Garcia-Vazquez & Ehly, 1995). Young children tend to find the opportunity to read aloud to an older peer tutor to be quite reinforcing, adding a motivational component to this intervention.

Elements of an Effective Peer Tutoring Program in Reading

While schools can exercise considerable creative freedom as they put together a peer tutoring program in reading, they should also take care to adhere to a core set of tutoring guidelines to

ensure success (Garcia-Vazquez & Ehly, 1995). These guidelines include:

- *selecting peer-tutoring activities that supplement classroom instruction* . Peer tutors are not reading teachers, so they do not *teach* new reading skills. However, peer tutors are ideal for the role of 'reading helpers', who motivate and encourage struggling readers to practice reading skills that were previously taught. Just as important, the tutor can give immediate corrective feedback whenever the child being tutored makes a reading error.
- *providing thorough training to peer tutors in the essential elements of the tutoring process* . Peer tutors cannot carry out the key components of their tutoring assignment unless they have been carefully trained beforehand. Schools organizing a peer tutor training should assume that tutors require lessons in behavioral expectations (e.g., how to move politely and respectfully through the hallway to and from tutoring sessions), use of praise (e.g., congratulating the tutee on having read a difficult passage), and simple academic intervention strategies (e.g., paired reading or 'listening while reading').
- *ensuring that peer tutors have mastered the essentials of tutoring before allowing them to meet with their tutees*. When training tutors, schools should give them opportunities to practice, and to demonstrate their mastery of, the various skills taught. Trainers can exercise their imaginations to come up with fun ways that tutors can practice skills under the watchful eye of the trainer. Group responding, pairing off students to complete cooperative learning activities, and use of role-play are only some of the strategies through which students can be invited to 'show what they know'.
- *adopting research-based treatments to improve the reading skills of tutees*. Peer tutors can be especially useful in helping their tutees to develop fluency in reading. The peer-tutoring program outlined in this manual trains tutors to use one of two research-based instructional techniques ('paired reading' or 'listening while reading') that have been shown to increase reading fluency.

The importance of reading fluency to literacy skills was underscored in the recent report issued by the National Reading Panel (2000). In a comprehensive review of effective techniques for teaching students to read, the NRP concluded that "classroom practices that encourage repeated oral reading with feedback and guidance leads to meaningful improvements in reading expertise for students—for good readers as well as those who are experiencing difficulties (NRP, 2000, p.3-3).

- *conducting periodic 'tutoring integrity checks'*. The active treatment components of most effective peer tutoring programs consist of (1) activities that give the tutee lots of opportunities to practice targeted academic skills, (2) praise, and (3) the timely use of corrective feedback. Adults who supervise peer tutors should occasionally drop in to observe tutoring session, using a structured 'integrity checklist' to rate the quality of the tutoring. These periodic integrity checks can make the supervisor aware of tutors who might be lapsing from the prescribed tutoring format and need additional 'refresher' training to improve their tutoring skills.

- *monitoring the effectiveness of peer tutoring.* The purpose of peer tutoring is to improve the reading skills of tutees and tutors alike. Schools should select evaluation measures to use to track students' reading levels both before tutoring begins (baseline) and during the tutoring program (ongoing progress monitoring). A well-researched and validated method for tracking student growth in reading fluency is Curriculum-Based Measurement (CBM). CBM is an ideal measure for peer tutoring programs and can be used to monitor reading growth in both tutors and tutees. For a free online manual with guidelines on how to use CBM, see Wright (1992).

About This Manual

This resource, *Peers As Reading Helpers: A Peer Tutor Training Manual*, is designed to provide schools with all of the instructions and materials needed to run a successful peer-tutoring program. Here is a preview of what you will find in later sections:

- *Chapter 2: Peer Tutoring: Assembling the Pieces.* School-wide peer tutoring depends on thoughtful advance preparation. This chapter provides a clear sequence for setting up a peer-tutoring program. It includes helpful forms and sample teacher and parent letters.
- *Chapter 3: Launching and Monitoring the Peer Tutoring Program.* This section highlights the tasks necessary to 'kick off' peer tutoring. It discusses how to train peer tutors, match tutors to tutees, monitor the quality of peer tutoring, and monitor student progress over time. The chapter includes forms to match tutors to tutees and to conduct observations of tutoring sessions.
- *'Kids as Reading Helpers' Training Curriculum.* The final section of the manual contains a four-session scripted curriculum for training peer tutors (*Behaviors, Giving Compliments, Strategies to Build Reading Fluency, Graduation Day*). It contains step-by-step directions for running tutor-training sessions and includes motivational posters and varied practice activities.

References

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