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Promoting Social Competence and Peer Relationships

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INTRODUCTION

When asked about their experiences in school, children and youth are apt to talk about their friendships and activities with peers. Most conversations about school revolve around close friends; hanging out during homeroom, at lunch, between classes, and at recess; involvement in extracurricular groups; and getting together with friends outside of school. If your own memories of school echo some of these same experiences, you already have a good grasp of what research has long affirmed. Peers play a critical role in the lives of children and youth.

Although conversations about the purposes and practice of education often center on academic rigor and achievement, supporting the development of successful and satisfying relationships among all students has long been considered an important element of high-quality educational programming (Brown, Branston, Hamre-Nietupski, Johnson, Wilcox, & Gruenewald, 1979). Indeed, the social opportunities afforded within general education classes and the wide range of other activities offered through school are often cited as being among the principal benefits of inclusive educational services (Carter, Bottema-Beutel, & Brock, 2014; Ryndak, Jackson, & White, 2013).

At the same time, peer relationships remain elusive or fleeting for substantial numbers of children and youth with severe disabilities. Instead of offering a sense of belonging, connections with peers, and shared learning experiences, schools often focus insufficient attention on providing students with severe disabilities the opportunities, skills, supports, and connections that enable them to interact and develop friendships with their peers. In other words, many students with severe disabilities are missing out on opportunities to develop the friendships and other social connections that help make life enjoyable and that will prepare them to transition successfully to adulthood. This chapter focuses on the important role relationships play in the lives of *all* students and describes recommended and evidence-based approaches for enhancing the social lives of children and youth with severe disabilities.

Throughout this chapter, you will hear about three of these students—Elena, Samuel, and Aloura. Like other students their age, each has much to contribute to and benefit from relationships with their peers.

Elena

Elena is a third grader at Kennedy Elementary School. Science, art, and music are just a few of her favorite classes and she loves attending a new after-school program. Like many of her classmates, she most looks forward to spending time with her friends at lunch, on the playground, and in her classes. Elena's teacher helped establish a peer network that provided an intentional avenue for her to meet new peers and develop new communication skills. Although Elena has a severe intellectual disability and is unable to speak, she certainly has much to say. She uses an augmentative communication device to greet her classmates, request help from a peer or teacher, contribute her ideas to class discussions, and tell jokes from one of her favorite books. As her classmates have gotten to know Elena, they have realized her facial expressions and gestures are another primary way she lets others know what she has to say. Because Elena also has cerebral palsy, her peers are quick to help her navigate the hallways, lunchroom, and playground when needed.

Samuel

Samuel is in seventh grade at Jefferson Middle School. As with many middle school students, Samuel can be quite shy when meeting someone for the first time and it takes a little while for him to feel comfortable around new people. Samuel also has autism and tends to repeat a few favorite phrases, avoid making eye contact, and hold fast to specific routines. However, when the topics of video games, movies, or comic books are brought up, his entire demeanor changes.

Samuel absolutely loves talking about manga comics, a new PlayStation® game, or the latest action film. Although these were once viewed as "obsessions" and perceived to be barriers to peer relationships, they are now the very interests that connect Samuel with a core group of peers. A paraprofessional, who himself collected comic books, knew of more than a dozen other students in the school who shared these interests. They started a weekly comic book club that met over the lunch period and occasionally after school. Samuel's new friends talk often about how much they have enjoyed getting to know, spending time with, and learning from Samuel.

Aloura

Aloura is junior at Northside High School. Until last year, she knew few of her classmates and often felt alone at school. Aloura has moderate intellectual disability, a mild hearing impairment, and a severe physical disability for which she uses an electric wheelchair. In an introductory art class, she first met Kara and Nicole—two talented painters whom the classroom teacher assigned to the same cooperative learning group. Through their growing friendship, Aloura discovered she had a knack for abstract painting featuring vibrant colors and bold lines. Kara encouraged Aloura to get involved in set design for an upcoming school play. Nicole—who was already involved in the art club—asked Aloura to come to the next meeting. Becoming involved in these activities offered Aloura an opportunity to become known for her talents, instead of for having a severe intellectual disability.

These experiences, along with those of thousands of other students, offer compelling reminders of the powerful roles educators, parents, related services providers, and—perhaps most of all—peers can play in enhancing the opportunities students with severe disabilities have to develop satisfying relationships and participate fully in the life of their school.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF PEER RELATIONSHIPS IN THE LIVES OF ALL CHILDREN

At first glance, it may seem unnecessary to spend time articulating the importance of relationships in the lives of children and youth with severe disabilities. After all, most of us can speak first-hand to the importance of relationships in our own lives. However, when the topic turns to educational planning, academic outcomes, functional skill development, and specific therapies are often discussed to the exclusion of peer relationships. The absence of social connections with peers for many students with severe disabilities suggests a stronger case must be made for the central place relationship development should have within educational services and supports.

Friendships Are Important in the Lives of All Students

From an early age, peer relationships shape the lives of children. Children spend an increasing amount of the day in the presence of other students in classes, at lunch, on the playground, and in other school activities. The interactions and relationships students have with one another can contribute to their social and emotional development, promote positive adjustment, and affect their engagement and involvement in school (Ryan & Ladd, 2012). It is within these relationships that students exchange a breadth of important social-related supports, such as emotional support, companionship, access to peers, information, practical assistance, and help with decision making (Kennedy, 2004). Peers both learn from and teach one another and, through their exchanges, acquire and strengthen an array of academic, social, leisure, and other every-day life skills. Having friendships and being liked by others also represent important protective factors for students, providing companionship and connections while offering a buffer against loneliness and isolation (Rubin, Bukowski, & Laursen, 2009). Most of all, meaningful interactions and close relationships make life enjoyable; promote well-being; and, simply put, bring children and youth—indeed all of us—happiness.

For Children and Youth with Severe Disabilities

For these same reasons, peer relationships are important for students with severe disabilities. Through their interactions with peers, students learn, practice, and refine important social, academic, self-determination, and other functional skills that can increase their independence, promote learning, and enhance their involvement in the life of their school (Jimenez, Browder, Spooner, & Dibiase, 2012; Weiner, 2005). Peers also represent an important source of social support for students with severe disabilities by modeling and reinforcing critical social skills, expanding students' social networks, and helping students learn peer norms and values (Carter et al., 2014; Carter, Bottema-Beutel, & Brock, 2014). In fact, peers may be at least as effective as adults in promoting certain aspects of social competence. Finally, peers who learn alongside their classmates with severe disabilities in school will also later work, live, recreate, and worship alongside them as adults. The relationships students develop throughout their schooling may have a long-term impact on the attitudes they encounter and the supports they receive into adulthood. Although close relationships with peers are no less important for children with severe disabilities, the absence of those relationships appear to be much more strongly felt.

For Peers Without Disabilities

The most satisfying relationships are usually characterized by reciprocity and shared enjoyment. Although some peers may initially express apprehension or hesitation toward interacting with their classmates with severe disabilities (Siperstein, Norins, & Mohler, 2007), those students who have had these experiences are often quite articulate about the substantive personal benefits they derive through these relationships. Among the benefits these students report are a deeper appreciation of diversity and individual differences, greater understanding of the value of inclusion, increased knowledge about specific disabilities, improved attitudes toward people with disabilities, acquisition of advocacy and support skills, greater self-confidence, a strengthened commitment to social justice principles, and personal growth (Copeland et al., 2004; Rosetti, 2011; Shokoohi-Yekta & Hendrickson, 2010). Moreover, providing social and academic assistance through peer-mediated interventions has been shown to convey substantial academic benefits to peers without disabilities (Cushing & Kennedy, 1997; McDonnell, Mathot-Buckner, Thorson, & Fister, 2001). Perhaps most importantly, peers often speak of the immediate enjoyment they receive and the friendships that emerge from these interactions (Anderson, Balandin, & Clendon, 2011; Rosetti, 2011). In other words, the reciprocal benefits associated with peers getting to know and learn alongside their classmates with severe disabilities reinforce the importance of making fostering friendships a central educational outcome.

> *Some of the students in Elena's class began spending time with her only after receiving an invitation from their teacher to be part of Elena's peer network. As these classmates came to know Elena, however, their initial motivations for spending time with her soon changed. Elena's peers are now quick to talk about their new friend and the fun they have together with her. Two students who sit next to and help support Elena during instructional times have found they are more focused and attend more closely to the teacher as a result of their peer support roles. Other friends of Elena have learned about the importance of inclusion and are often seen advocating in small ways for those classmates who feel left out.*

THE DIVERSITY OF PEER RELATIONSHIPS

Although relationships can be difficult to define or quantify, their absence is easily recognized by adults and sharply felt by students. Of course, not everyone describes peer relationships in similar ways. Indeed, even throughout this chapter, the phrase *peer relationships* is used broadly to refer to the wide range of associations and affiliations students have with others.

Defining Relationships

What exactly is a peer relationship? It is true that how we define the various types of relationships students have within schools is subjective. At the same time, most of us "know them when we see them" and can easily recognize when they are absent in the life of a student. In general, *peer relationships* refer to the interactions and associations students have with other children and youth who are of the same age (Rubin, Bukowski, & Laursen, 2009). Relationships typically are apparent in the conversations students have, the connections they feel, and the satisfaction they bring. However, there is a difference between having a relation *to* someone and being in a relationship *with* someone. For example, peers may refer to a student with severe disabilities as being their classmate, lab partner, teammate, schoolmate, or neighbor—labels describing the relation of one student to the other—without actually having a personal connection with that student. The most desirable peer relationships are evidenced when students do things together, talk with one another, attribute value to their affiliation, and describe their interactions as mutually enjoyable.

The Variety of Interactions and Relationships

What types of interactions and relationships do—or should—children and youth have during and beyond the school day? Peer relationships take many forms and vary along several dimensions, each offering different benefits and opportunities for students. Attending to the types of interactions and relationships students with severe disabilities have with their peers can provide insight into the quality of their social connections and help educators, parents, and other members of the planning team identify areas that would benefit from additional support and focused intervention. Consider the following social experiences of students.

Academic and Social Interactions

Within classrooms, teachers typically encourage students to converse with one another about ongoing instructional activities, materials, projects, and related tasks. For example, students with and without disabilities might collaborate on a small-group activity, help each other with an assignment, demonstrate how to perform a task, discuss aspects of the course content, share notes, or study together for an upcoming quiz. Through these academic-focused interactions, students learn important course content, provide and receive instructional support, and strengthen their capacity to work collaboratively with others. Moreover, these interactions can promote engagement within the classroom and make learning more enjoyable. In many classrooms, these are the types of peer interactions teachers most highly value and frequently reinforce.

Social interactions are those that address non-instructional topics, including conversations about peers, popular culture (e.g., social media, movies, favorite internet sites), current events, extracurricular and after-school activities, or personal issues. Students also joke with one another, offer personal support, and exchange social amenities (e.g., saying "Hi" in the hallway). These typically represent the primary focus of interactions taking place outside of the classroom, such as during lunch, at recess, in the hallway, or during club activities. But many of these social interactions also take place within classrooms before the class period starts, during transitions between activities, and after completing assignments or group work (Carter, Sisco, Brown, Brickham, & Al-Khabbaz, 2008; Schnorr, 1997). Even in the midst of ongoing instruction, students may be passing notes, gesturing to a peer, or laughing at a peer's joke. Thus, inclusive classrooms appear to offer rich opportunities to support a range of interactions among students.

Although the distinction between academic and social interactions may seem trivial, each is likely to set the occasion for the emergence of different types of relationships. Students who talk only about their schoolwork tend to describe their

relationships very differently from those whose interactions are more social in nature. Yet, descriptive research suggests the peer interactions students with severe disabilities have in the classrooms often focus narrowly on academic topics (Carter, Hughes, Guth, & Copeland, 2005). Moreover, the nature of students' interactions with their peers without disabilities also is influenced by the manner in which students are asked to work together. Tutorial and instructional activities tend to foster instructional interactions, while recreational and leisure activities tend to promote social interactions (Hughes, Carter, Hughes, Bradford, & Copeland, 2002).

Samuel talks with a number of different students each day at school, but the nature of his relationships with these peers are quite varied. In his American history class, there are several students to whom Samuel can turn for assistance when he needs help with an assignment or his class project. These students help Samuel organize his class materials, answer his questions, and prompt him to pay attention when he seems distracted. Until recently, these were the only kinds of interactions Samuel had. He certainly appreciated their help, but Samuel would not consider these students to be friends. As he has come to know more students through involvement in various extracurricular clubs, Samuel's teachers increasingly see him talking with peers about comic books, the newest YouTube videos, or favorite movies. These are the interactions Samuel looks forward to most each day.

Friendships

Historically, research addressing the social lives of children and youth with severe disabilities has focused most heavily on increasing the quantity and quality of discrete interactions, such as initiations and conversational turns (see reviews by Carter, Sisco, Chung, & Stanton-Chapman, 2010; Webster & Carter, 2007). Certainly, it is important to encourage academic and social interactions, but they do not necessarily reflect evidence of or always translate into a friendship. At its simplest level, a friend is someone whom a student knows and likes, and someone who also chooses them as a friend (Berndt & McCandless, 2007; Reinders, 2011). Mutuality, reciprocity, closeness, and companionship are attributes often associated with friendship. But friendships can also be described along a continuum. For example, those peers who have relationships that are especially close and enduring may be referred to as "best friends." Students sometimes differentiate between "close friends" and "good friends" when talking about peers who they see occasionally or with whom their ties are not quite as strong. The interactions students with severe disabilities have with their peers can provide the initial encounters through which friendships initially emerge or offer the contexts through which friendships are sustained or deepened. However, interactions—even if quite frequent—should not serve as a substitute for real friendships. A number of examples of how such friendships develop, deepen, and benefit have been described in the literature (Rosetti, 2011; Staub, 1998).

At the beginning of the school year, Aloura would sometimes be greeted by peers passing in the hallway and she would occasionally eat with classmates at lunch. During her classes, she would periodically talk with her classmates while working on small-group projects or when she needed help. But she had no real friendships. She was never invited to birthday parties and had no one to go with her to the homecoming football game. And when she went to the movies or the mall, it was usually with her parents or sister. It wasn't until she met and developed friendships with Kara and Nicole that Aloura really began looking forward to going to school each day.

Status Relationships

Early efforts to promote peer relationships within schools often involved establishing peer tutoring arrangements or structured friendship programs. Although these strategies have been quite effective at increasing social participation and the frequency of interactions, educators should be cautious about the types of relationships sometimes promoted through these efforts. For example, the efforts among school staff to facilitate

regular interaction among students with and without disabilities can inadvertently foster relationships characterized as unbalanced, non-reciprocal, or exclusively tutorial. When students with severe disabilities are primarily or exclusively placed in the role of tutee or the consistent recipient of support, real friendships may be less likely to materialize. Such supportive relationships are not all inherently undesirable because it is commonplace in schools to occasionally be on the receiving end of assistance and support from peers. But these should not represent the *only* type of relationships students have with their classmates. Educators should look for indicators that suggest a status relationship is pervasive, such as when (a) students with disabilities rarely initiate interactions and are always on the receiving end of requests, (b) peer interactions more closely resemble those students have with their teachers than with other classmates, (c) interactions are dominated by helping or caregiving behaviors, (d) the roles students assume (e.g., tutor/tutee, supporter/supported) remain static and never change, or (e) relationships do not appear to be mutually enjoyable and voluntary for everyone involved.

When Elena's peers first began to provide support in the classroom, it was clear they saw themselves as mini-teachers. Almost all of their conversations were instructional and they did many things for Elena. Indeed, they were mirroring many of the ways in which they saw special educators interacting with Elena. This was not what the classroom teacher had intended when she first began pairing students together, and she realized the students would need some extra guidance on the roles they should and should not assume when working together.

Peer Groups and Social Networks

A friendship typically refers to a dyadic relationship between two people. However, the peer environment changes as children progress through school. Students' interactions and relationships become situated within larger, informal networks of peers. Sometimes, these peer groups are organized around students who regularly spend time interacting and doing things together (i.e., cliques). For example, students may consistently spend time with some or all of a core group of friends during lunch, between classes, or after school and on weekends. Other times, the associations among students within a peer group are based primarily on reputation (i.e., crowds). For example, students may be associated with a larger network of peers based on some common defining feature, such as their interests, activities, abilities, social status, or cultural background. These associations may exist even if students do not regularly or ever interact with one another. Because participation in a social network can offer an important source of companionship and social support—and the absence of these networks represent a source of considerable concern and loneliness—it is important for educators to create supportive opportunities for students with severe disabilities to be part of a peer group that brings them enjoyment and satisfaction. It is also important to recognize such networks can be dynamic and the relationships among individual students within such groups can deepen or dissolve over time in unexpected ways. The evolving nature of peer networks highlight the importance of regularly reflecting on the connections students with severe disabilities have and the supports needed to maintain those connections.

Membership and Belonging

Within peer networks, classrooms, formal groups and clubs, or the broader school, a student's sense of belonging and membership is enhanced by the interactions he or she experiences and the relationships that develop. Students have a keen sense of who is—and whether they are—truly part of (rather than simply present in) a larger group. For example, Schnorr (1997) emphasized that being enrolled in a general education classroom does not automatically convey membership or a sense of community. Students with severe disabilities may still be viewed by others as a visitor within the classroom or a temporary guest, but not recognized as a full, contributing member. Although difficult to directly observe and measure, fostering a sense of belonging

among all students represents a qualitative dimension of peer relationships requiring careful thought.

Although it didn't happen overnight, Aloura now is definitely part of a peer group. Recognizing her interest and talent in art, Aloura's teachers helped connect her with the set design team for the high school's drama productions. Over the course of working closely with her peers on the fall musical, Aloura has become embedded in a network of students who share a common interest in the fine arts. As a member of the theater clique, she always has a group of peers with whom she can sit at lunch or hang out in between classes.

Romantic Relationships

As students enter adolescence, romantic interests and intimate relationships assume an increasingly prominent place in the lives and thoughts of most youth. Yet, dating, long-term relationships, falling in love, intimacy, and other romantic experiences remain among the most understudied and least supported aspects of adolescent relationships for youth with severe disabilities (TASH, 2000; Travers & Tancini, 2010; Valenti-Hein & Choinski, 2007). The limited attention given to this issue may reflect broader societal attitudes toward sexuality and individuals with disabilities (Brown & Pirtle, 2008). Just as with other adolescents, youth with severe disabilities may want to—and should be supported to—explore and pursue intimate relationships.

Relationships with Adults

In a chapter focused on supporting peer relationships, it is still appropriate to mention the prominent role adults play in the lives of children and youth with severe disabilities. Adults still represent the primary or exclusive relationships experienced by many children and youth with severe disabilities. Students with severe disabilities spend a substantial portion of their school day in close proximity to paraprofessionals, special educators, related services providers, and other adults (Brock & Carter, 2013; Giangreco, 2010). Interviews with students with disabilities about their relationships with school staff suggest several areas of concern (Broer, Doyle, & Giangreco, 2005; Hemmingsson, Borell, & Gustavsson, 2003). For example, students often describe paraprofessionals and other paid staff as their primary friends, as protectors, or as caregivers. The appropriateness of such relationships is questionable and is of particular concern when these are students' only relationships. When training and supervising paraprofessionals, special educators should define and describe the types of relationships that are (and are not) appropriate for staff to nurture with students. Moreover, social skill instruction for students with severe disabilities can also focus on teaching them to differentiate the types of interactions that are appropriate with adults (e.g., teachers, paraprofessionals, employers) and those that are appropriate with peers.

The Role of Context and Relationships

When it comes to peer relationships, location and context both matter. The interactions students have with one another and the relationships they experience can be affected by the settings in which they spend time together, the activities in which they participate, and the grade level in which they are enrolled (Carter, Sisco, Brown, Brickham, & Al-Khabbaz, 2008). Within classrooms, some types of interactions are sanctioned or reinforced, while others are discouraged or punished. The interactions considered appropriate within cooperative learning groups look quite different from those encouraged during a lecture or independent seatwork. And conversations during art class may look different from those taking place in math class. Students should be equipped with the supports and taught the skills that will enable them to participate meaningfully in these interactions within each of these contexts.

At the same time, the nature and focus of peer relationships typically evolve as students grow older. The importance of relationships does not diminish as students

move through elementary, middle, and high school, nor does the supportive role adults play in promoting relationships. However, the contexts within which students spend time together broaden, the roles of adults in facilitating relationships become less direct, the involvement of peers in providing social support becomes more prominent, and the influence and importance of peers become more pervasive. In *preschool* and *elementary school,* children spend most of their time in the same classroom with a smaller group of peers. Relationships are more dyadic and "best" friendships are more prominent. Children also may have more unstructured and play time during which socializing is a central goal (e.g., recess, play groups). Relationships extending beyond the school day tend to be limited to other children living in their neighborhood or students with whom family members make arrangements to see. In *middle school,* students show an increased interest in opposite-sex friendships and romantic relationships may begin to emerge. Students often attend larger schools and change classes each period, encountering many different students. The influence of cliques and crowds becomes more prominent. And the expansion of extracurricular and after-school opportunities introduce new contexts within which students spend their time and meet other peers. In *high school,* the complexity of interactions and relationships increases and the influence of peers intensifies (Carter et al., 2014). A driver's license and the expansion of school-sponsored extracurricular activities mean that relationships increasingly extend beyond the school day. Students rely on technology (e.g., cell phones, text messaging, email, social networking sites) to stay in touch and make plans. For students with severe disabilities, the increasing importance of peer relationships, coupled with the complexity of these relationships, restricted participation in general education classes, communication difficulties, and challenges in accessing the same technological tools (e.g., texting, social networking websites) used by other youth can make these students particularly vulnerable to social isolation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTENTIONAL EFFORTS TO FOSTER RELATIONSHIPS

Even when students spend almost all of their day in the company of their peers, physical proximity does not necessarily lead to social interactions or translate into relationships. The social interactions and relationships of children and youth with severe disabilities have been the focus of extensive research over several decades (Carter, Sisco, Chung, & Stanton-Chapman, 2010; Odom & Ogawa, 1992; Webster & Carter, 2007). Collectively, these studies offer a clear reminder that interactions and relationships among students with and without severe disabilities are likely to be infrequent without well-designed support strategies and intentional planning.

Relationships with Peers Who Do Not Have Disabilities

Even within inclusive classrooms and other school settings (e.g., lunchrooms, playgrounds, hallways), social interactions may be limited in frequency or quality unless meaningful opportunities and adequate supports are established. For example, Carter, Sisco, Brown, Brickham, and Al-Khabbaz (2008) spent more than 150 hours observing the social and academic participation of students in middle and high school with students with intellectual disability or autism within general education classrooms. Despite being enrolled in the same classroom, most (but not all) students with disabilities infrequently interacted with their classmates. Moreover, peer interactions were least likely to occur when students with disabilities were receiving one-to-one, direct support from paraprofessionals or special educators. This paucity of interactions has been found in classrooms across grades (e.g., Chung, Carter, & Sisco, 2012a; Katz, Mirenda, & Auerbach, 2002; Kennedy, Shukla, & Fryxell, 1997). Although the

cafeteria often represents the social epicenter of most schools, students with severe disabilities often sit at separate tables and few interactions occur with their peers without disabilities during lunch (Dore, Dion, Wagner, & Brunet, 2002). For example, Hughes and colleagues (1999) observed students with and without intellectual disability conversing less than 1% of the time during lunch in the cafeteria. Students' interactions on the playground, in the hallways, and during homeroom also can be somewhat limited and highly variable (Kemp & Carter, 2002).

Although limited attention has been focused on the friendships and social relationships of students with severe disabilities, two nationally representative longitudinal studies provide insight into this dimension of children's lives. The Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study involved interviews with parents about the social experiences of their children with disabilities (ages 6 to 13) who were served under each of the different special education categories (Wagner, Cadwallader, Marder, Newman, Garza, & Blackorby, 2002). According to these parents, 17% of children with intellectual disability, 21% of children with multiple disabilities, and 32% of children with autism had *never* visited with any friends (with or without disabilities) during the previous year. Half of the children with intellectual disability, 64% of children with multiple disabilities, and 81% of children with autism *never* or *rarely* receive telephone calls from friends.

The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 focused on the social involvement of high school students with disabilities (Wagner, Cadwallader, Garza, & Cameto, 2004). Interviews with parents revealed that only 22% of youth with intellectual disability, 14% of youth with multiple disabilities, and 6% of youth with autism were reported to *frequently* see any friends outside of school. Forty-two percent of youth with intellectual disability, 63% of youth with multiple disabilities, and 84% of youth with autism *never* or *rarely* receive telephone calls from friends. And only 54% of youth with intellectual disability, 38% of youth with multiple disabilities, and 24% of youth with autism get together with friends outside of formal groups at least once each week.

Such research highlights the elusiveness of peer relationships and extends a compelling call for more direct intervention and support efforts toward this aspect of children's lives. Two points should be highlighted here. First, our focus on individual children should not be overlooked in these statistics. What matters most is not whether the majority of children with disabilities have friends or interaction opportunities, but whether Elena, Samuel, Aloura, or any of the other students with whom you work experiences a sense of belonging, knows and is known by his or her peers, and enjoys durable relationships with friends. Second, these statistics should not be interpreted to suggest that restricted relationships are inherent to having a severe disability. On the contrary, a fairly extensive body of research shows that with intentional efforts, relationships can and should be commonplace (Matheson, Olsen, & Weisner, 2007; Naraian, 2010; Rosetti, 2011). In other words, peer relationships are not elusive because students with severe disabilities cannot participate in or benefit from them, but instead because intentional efforts rarely are made or the support and service delivery models relied on in schools inadvertently hinder relationships.

PROMOTING PEER INTERACTION AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Fostering relationships usually requires intentional efforts. Although being present in the same classroom, lunchroom, or playground as other students is a prerequisite to interactions, mere proximity often is not enough to increase interactions and change peer attitudes. Adults must view peer relationships as a primary educational outcome and assume an active role in promoting this outcome. Efforts to promote peer interactions and social relationships are most likely to be successful when they are systematic and outcomes focused. To encourage these connections, we propose a systematic approach involving (a) assessment to identify social-related needs and opportunities, (b) planning and implementing strategies to target needs and capitalize on opportunities, and (c) ongoing progress monitoring and adjustments to planning and implementation.

Assessment to Identify Needs and Opportunities

Schoolwide Reflection

Even within a single school, opportunities for interaction and relationships can be uneven and inconsistently available. For example, inclusive classrooms and clubs can exist right alongside segregated classrooms and activities. Practitioners can begin by reflecting carefully on the opportunities students with and without severe disabilities currently have to spend time with and learn alongside one another in their school, as well as the support models that may be hindering or enhancing those opportunities. Such intentional reflection can guide schools in determining and prioritizing initial steps for expanding the quality and availability of opportunities and supports provided to students. For example, a small group of educators might begin a self-assessment process simply by listing all of the classrooms, clubs, and other settings where students typically gather in their school and determining whether students with and without severe disabilities are present together in these places at the same times and are involved in the same activities (see Figure 11–1). Involving a few students with and without severe disabilities in this reflection process can be particularly insightful because educators and administrators who describe their schools as "inclusive" may be surprised when students perceive the social environment of their school quite differently. For example, students with and without disabilities may be present in the same lunchroom, but rarely eat at the same tables. Or they may be enrolled in physical education or elective courses, but absent from core academic classes.

Several general and special educators at Aloura's high school were concerned that many students—both with and without disabilities—were disengaged from school and had few supportive friendships. Together, they began compiling a list of all of the extracurricular, service-learning, after-school, and other activities offered through their school. They also reflected on the ways in which various groups of students accessed these experiences and the barriers to student involvement they might begin to address. They shared their findings with other teachers at a faculty meeting and prepared a small booklet to give to students and families that included brief descriptions of these activities. During annual planning

FIGURE 11–1
Tool for Reflecting on Social Opportunities Throughout the School Day

School Contexts	Are Students with and Without Disabilities . . .		
	in the Same Place?	at the Same Time?	Doing the Same Things?
Academic classes	N R S A	N R S A	N R S A
Related arts classes	N R S A	N R S A	N R S A
Elective classes	N R S A	N R S A	N R S A
Vocational classes	N R S A	N R S A	N R S A
Lunch	N R S A	N R S A	N R S A
Recess	N R S A	N R S A	N R S A
Hallways	N R S A	N R S A	N R S A
Extracurricular clubs	N R S A	N R S A	N R S A
Assemblies, pep rallies, spirit week, and other whole-school activities	N R S A	N R S A	N R S A
Athletics	N R S A	N R S A	N R S A
Dances, music or drama productions, and other school-sponsored activities	N R S A	N R S A	N R S A
School jobs (office assistant, library aide, school store)	N R S A	N R S A	N R S A
Other: _____	N R S A	N R S A	N R S A

N – Never, R – Rarely, S – Sometimes, A – Always

meetings, teachers now talk with students about their interests and help them identify avenues through which they can explore these interests with their peers in school-sponsored activities.

Reflecting on a Student's Social Relationships

In addition to reflecting broadly on existing opportunities within the school, educators should gather more targeted data on the interactions and relationships of their students. An examination of the data is essential for determining a student's individualized instructional and support needs, as well as for evaluating the impact of any intervention efforts. Recognizing the inherent complexity of peer relationships, it is valuable to combine multiple approaches to assessing the social lives of students. Observations and interviews are two helpful approaches for informing this reflection.

Observations. Educators, paraprofessionals, or other school staff should periodically conduct formal or informal observations within classrooms, extracurricular programs, and other informal school activities to determine whether students interact with their peers and, if so, how. These observations can focus on a particular time of day (e.g., lunch, recess, reading, history club) or be spread across multiple contexts to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the social opportunities students encounter and access. As with all assessments, it is important to clearly define the specific behaviors that are the focus of these observations so data can be reliably collected and evaluated over time. The research literature reflects a wide spectrum of measures that could provide indicators of the quality of students' relationships. Although Figure 11–2 includes examples of social measures, educators should define these measures so that they can meaningfully reflect the specific outcomes most important for a specific student.

In addition, the following set of overarching questions can help educators focus their observations (Carter, Cushing, & Kennedy, 2009; Downing, 2005a):

- Do students have a reliable means of communicating with their peers?
- Are they able to converse about the things peers typically enjoy talking about?
- What do students' social interactions look like?
- With whom do these interactions occur?
- Where and when do these interactions take place?
- Are their interactions typical of those taking place among other students in these contexts?
- What indicators suggest students enjoy spending time with their peers?
- How are students supported in the classroom and in other school activities?
- What is the nature of the support students with severe disabilities receive from their peers?

Direct observations can enable educators to understand the kinds of peer relationships students already enjoy, identify additional avenues for expanding opportunities for interaction, determine the type of social and communication skills that would enhance students' interactions, and identify areas of potential concern requiring more focused attention.

Interviews. The quality of existing relationships is as important to consider as the extent to which students interact with their peers. Some relationships are highly valued by students, while others hold less importance. Students with severe disabilities can provide a critical perspective on the friendships they have and the nature of their relationships with their peers. Students should be asked to share their views on whom they enjoy spending time with, the types of interactions and school involvement they would like to have, the ways in which they would prefer to work with their classmates, and the particular peers whom they would like to know better. Although the perspectives of younger children and students with complex communication

FIGURE 11–2
Examples of Social Outcomes That Can Be Used to Document Intervention Need and/or Impact

Social Outcome	Definition	Example
Social interactions	One student acknowledging another using verbal or non-verbal communicative behaviors, such as gestures, pointing, or using an AAC device	Elena used her AAC device to ask for help from her peers, comment on her group's project, and excuse herself from the classroom.
Initiation of conversation	New comments preceded by at least five seconds without an interaction or reflecting a change in conversational topic	Although she usually responded to her classmates when they ask her questions in science class, Aloura infrequently started conversations without prompting from her teacher.
Appropriate interactions	Interactions typical of other peers in the same setting, or responses generally corresponding to an initiation in meaning and tone	Samuel's conversations were occasionally inappropriate to the math class, particularly when he talked about children's television shows.
Positive affect	Smiling, laughing, relaxed body position, or making positive remarks	Elena's facial expressions suggested that she enjoyed her interactions with Oscar, but not with Thomas.
Quality of interaction	Overall judgment of interaction satisfaction on the basis of students' affect, reciprocity, and topics discussed, ranging from *low* to *high*	The art teacher described Aloura's interactions with her classmates as being of fairly high quality, although somewhat less equally balanced than those typical of other students in the class.
Interaction partners	People with whom the student is interacting, such as classmates, peer supports, other students with disabilities, paraprofessionals, or teachers	During lunch, Samuel tended to interact with three of his closest friends—Edgar, Lisa, and Carolyn.
Social contacts	Interactions in the context of an activity lasting at least 15 minutes	Although most of Elena's interactions were relatively brief, she typically had three or four extended interactions each school day.
Peers contacted	Total number of *different* peers involved in social contacts	Aloura primarily interacted with two students (Kara and Nicole) in art class, but she occasionally worked with Audrey and Kimberly.
Social support	Providing information, access to others, material aid, emotional support, help with decisions, or companionship	Samuel's peer supports primarily helped him complete his class assignments and encouraged him when he was having a tough day.
Peer proximity	Sitting directly next to or within three feet of a classmate	Although Elena sat directly next to two of her classmates for half of the class period, she worked with her paraprofessional for the rest of the time on one side of the classroom.
Social networks	The number of peers who are considered to be a "friend" by the student and with whom he or she has had contact in the recent past	Aloura has four friends with whom she spends most of her time.
Membership	Having access to valued social roles and the symbols of belonging	Samuel is considered by others to be a leader within the comic book club.
Social status	The number of classmates who identify a student as a close friend or "most liked" peer	More than half of her classmates consider Elena to be a friend.

(Figure 7.1 (pp. 88) from *Peer Support Strategies for Improving All Students' Social Lives and Learning* (2009) by E.W. Carter, L.S. Cushing, & C.H. Kennedy. Baltimore, Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., Inc. Adapted by permission.)

challenges often are more difficult to discern, they are no less important to understand. Offering multiple avenues for students to express their preferences and perspectives—as well as observing students' affect as they spend time with peers—can provide important insight into these issues.

The perspectives of peers without disabilities also can provide valuable insight into the relationships students with severe disabilities experience, the attitudes of other students in the classroom or school, and the broader peer culture. Educators can informally ask peers to share their views regarding factors that contribute to membership and a sense of belonging, describe their own relationship with a particular student, discuss the roles of students in facilitating friendships, and suggest specific information and supports that would enhance their relationships with their classmates with severe disabilities. Peers typically have unique insight into the barriers to relationships existing in their school and creative recommendations for promoting greater social participation.

Ms. Barker sat down with Samuel to ask how things were going in American history class. Did Samuel enjoy working with and receiving support from his peers? Did he want to continue working with them? Were there other classmates he would like to get to know? Did Samuel think he needed other assistance that he was not currently receiving? In addition, Ms. Barker talked with both of Samuel's peer supports about their experiences. What aspects of the peer support arrangement were going really well? Were they comfortable with their responsibilities? What changes have they noticed in Samuel? How have they personally benefited from their involvement as a peer support?

Other teachers, paraprofessionals, and related services providers who work with a student during the school day can also be asked to describe the interactions and relationships they have seen in different settings. These adults may be able to identify specific factors that promote or hinder interactions in specific school contexts, as well as speak to the benefits students accrue through their relationships with peers. Finally, family members can be asked to share how their child describes his or her relationships at school and whether these interactions extend beyond the school day and, if so, how. Parents and siblings have a unique vantage point from which to address the extent to which relationships maintain outside of school.

Collectively, observations and interviews can provide a clearer indication of whether students with severe disabilities experience peer relationships that provide companionship, promote learning, and bring enjoyment. Such information can then be discussed as part of person-centered planning meetings in which goals related to fostering social connections and peer relationships are addressed. It can also be incorporated into a student's IEP in the form of goals and objectives addressing social skills, peer interactions, and new social connections. Such goals not only drive the selection and design of intervention efforts, but they also introduce an important element of accountability for outcomes in this area. Moreover, regular data collection can provide planning teams with the targeted information needed to determine whether students are affected by the intervention and the support they receive and, if so, how.

Aloura's special education teacher, Mr. Haystie, was excited about the friendships Aloura had made so far this school year. But he also wanted to make sure Aloura had opportunities to maintain and deepen those relationships over time. His conversations with Aloura revealed that she enjoyed being part of the set crew and liked spending time with her new friends. At the same time, she was interested in becoming involved in other school activities and getting together with Kara and Nicole outside of school. Mr. Haystie talked with Aloura's parents about arranging transportation for Aloura to weekend activities with her friends. Mr. Haystie also talked with Kara and Nicole about their friendship with Aloura. Both students suggested some social-related skills that might help Aloura fit in better with her peers. Based on his conversation, Mr. Haystie decided to involve Aloura in the social skills curriculum he was teaching during the semester. Finally, he asked a paraprofessional to collect data on Aloura's peer interactions in her various classes. It became clear Aloura was much less connected socially in her core academic classes than she was in her art class. All of this information was used by Mr. Haystie and other members of the IEP team to refine Aloura's educational goals and to arrange for more targeted supports in several of her classes.

STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING SOCIAL NEEDS AND MAXIMIZING RELATIONSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

Although much is now known about the contexts within which peer relationships are most likely to develop and be maintained, friendships can form or falter for a variety of reasons. As you consider the following seven factors, reflect on your past school experiences as a student and consider which of these elements contributed to the relationships you developed with peers.

Shared Space

Among the most prominent barriers to peer relationships in schools is that students with and without severe disabilities are not spending time in the same places. Students with severe disabilities in most schools still spend the majority of their day apart from their peers without disabilities (McLeskey, Landers, Williamson, & Hoppey, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Further, when physically present in classrooms, students with severe disabilities may not be active participants for a variety of reasons, including the presence of paraprofessionals who inadvertently curb interactions, physical isolation in a corner of the classroom, the unavailability of a communication system, and the use of instructional strategies in which the student with disabilities has few opportunities to respond. Descriptive research comparing inclusive and special education settings indicates social opportunities simply are less available in self-contained classrooms (Freeman & Alkin, 2000; Hunt, Farron-Davis, Beckstead, Curtis, & Goetz, 1994; Kennedy, Shukla, & Fryxell, 1997). Yet, when asked about the primary barriers to developing friendships with students with severe disabilities in their schools, peers consistently emphasize they are not enrolled in the same classes and had few opportunities to see each other in school (Copeland et al., 2004; Han & Chadsey, 2004). When older students participate in community-based instruction, a focus on creating shared space shifts to workplaces, postsecondary campuses, recreational programs, and other inclusive settings throughout a community.

> *The few minutes of break between each class period, hanging out in the courtyard over lunch, and spending time catching up after the school bell—these are the times when most students at Northside get together with friends, talk about their day, and make plans for after school or the weekend. Until this school year, Aloura spent all of these times with school staff. She left each class a few minutes early to avoid the crowded hallways, she ate lunch with paraprofessionals and other students with severe disabilities at a table at the side of the cafeteria, and she went outside to catch the accessible bus 10 minutes before the last bell rang. She developed few friendships—not because she had severe disabilities—but because she so rarely had a chance to spend time with and get to know her classmates.*

Shared Activities

Although it seems obvious that interactions are unlikely to occur unless students are in the same place, at the same time, and doing the same things (Carter, Swedeen, & Kurkowski, 2008), much of what takes place in many schools belies recognition of this important element. It is nearly impossible for students with disabilities to interact with their peers when they are not sitting near each other in classrooms, they are pulled out of class to receive related services, or they are learning completely different academic content. Similarly, it is difficult to spend time together when students with disabilities eat lunch in different areas of the cafeteria, travel the hallways at different times, and are not participating in the same extracurricular activities. Shared activities provide the context within which students interact with one another. And because relationships often develop over time, it is essential students have sustained and recurring opportunities to connect with classmates.

Although Elena had always been enrolled in general education classes, she had not always been working on the same content objectives as her classmates. More often than not, Elena would be pulled to the side of the classroom with a paraprofessional to work on specific individualized education program (IEP) objectives, therapy goals, or altogether different learning activities. As a result, there were few opportunities for Elena to work with her peers and no compelling reason for her peers to talk to her. More closely aligning Elena's expectations and instruction with the rest of the class and embedding more cooperative learning activities provided a meaningful context for Elena to work with and meet her peers.

Shared Interests

Relationships often begin upon discovery of shared interests. The likelihood students will want to spend time together may be influenced by their awareness of the interests, talents, experiences, and aspirations they hold in common. Students with severe disabilities have interests that—because of their communication challenges—often go undiscovered. Educators and families can play an important role in (a) highlighting the specific things students with and without disabilities hold in common, (b) providing students with opportunities to develop age-appropriate interests that might provide a link between students, and (c) designing collaborative activities that incorporate students' individual interests.

A love for painting and creative expression was definitely what connected Aloura, Kara, and Nicole. Had Aloura never enrolled in art class, these friendships may never have had an opportunity to develop. Aloura's special education teacher recognized this and began making extra efforts to discover the interests and talents of all of the students on her caseload. She then looked for opportunities within the school and broader community where her students could utilize those interests and talents in ways that might foster new relationships.

Student-Focused Instruction

High-quality systematic instruction from educators, paraprofessionals, and other adults that focuses on social and communication skills can enhance students' interactions and relationships with peers. Many students would benefit from learning how to start conversations with their peers, greet their classmates, play cooperatively at recess, comment on a classmate's work or content discussed in class, use an augmentative communication device, and demonstrate other valuable social skills. Although much attention has been directed toward social skill intervention strategies (e.g., Koegel, Matos-Freden, Lang, & Koegel, 2012; Walton & Ingersoll, 2013; Wang, Cui, & Parrila, 2011), acquiring these skills should not be considered a prerequisite to having meaningful opportunities to interact with one's peers. Indeed, social and communication skills are best learned and practiced within the context of actual interactions.

Students with severe disabilities also must have access to a reliable and effective means of communication. Students cannot communicate effectively with their peers if their augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices are purchased but not used, signs and gestures are taught to them but not understood by peers, communication books are created but left in lockers, or AAC devices remain at school at the end of the day (Chung, Carter, & Sisco, 2012b). It is also important that the social skills students are taught and the communication systems they are provided are flexible enough to reflect the full range of interactions children have with their peers and are appropriate to the various settings in which they are spending time with their peers.

Before the school provided her with an AAC device, Elena was entirely dependent on her paraprofessional, Ms. Bauer, and other school staff to interpret her gestures and other communication attempts for classmates. Although Ms. Bauer knew Elena very well, she didn't always interpret Elena's initiations accurately. Other times, Elena's attempts to communicate with her peers were inadvertently overlooked. Gaining access to an AAC system changed everything. As Elena learned to use her speech-generating device, Ms. Bauer taught other students in the class how to support and encourage Elena's interactions.

Peer-Focused Instruction

Some barriers to interactions and relationships are related to the attitudes and knowledge peers possess (Campbell, Morton, Roulston, & Barger, 2011; Copeland et al., 2004; Siperstein, Norins, & Mohler, 2007). For example, students without disabilities may have insufficient knowledge about disabilities or remain uncertain of how to interact with classmates who may communicate differently. Others may hold negative attitudes toward people with disabilities or initially be hesitant to interact with a classmate with severe disabilities. Sharing basic information with students can help alleviate any concerns students may have, promote greater confidence, and lay the groundwork for future interactions (Kent-Walsh & McNaughton, 2005). Sometimes the information provided to peers is very targeted, focusing on helping peers learn about a student's interests and talents or understand how the student communicates, participates in various activities, or benefits from specific supports. Schools can also take broader steps to promote awareness throughout the entire school by making sure inclusion is a schoolwide value, emphasizing relationships as an important element of their mission, and communicating information that helps dispel stereotypes.

Promoting Valued Roles

Reciprocal relationships may be more likely to emerge when valued roles are identified for all students (Wolfensberger, 2007). If students with severe disabilities are perpetually identified as the recipients of help and assistance, they have few opportunities to demonstrate and become known for their strengths, interests, and contributions. Which roles are valued often is best determined by asking the students themselves. For example, being the timekeeper in a cooperative group, serving in a leadership position in an extracurricular activity, teaching a skill to others, and contributing ideas during group planning may all be considered high-status roles by students in certain settings.

> *Samuel was used to always being the recipient of help. In his classes, he was almost always accompanied by an adult who sat next to him and provided one-to-one academic and behavioral support. Occasionally, he received extra assistance from a peer tutor or other classmates on particular academic tasks. Although he certainly benefited academically from the individualized help, he developed few friendships in his classes and felt like he was only known for what he couldn't do. But this was not the case in extracurricular activities. Samuel was clearly among the experts in the comic book club, where other club members admired Samuel for his considerable knowledge and often turned to him for answers to their questions. His gaming talents and expertise in programming landed him in the role of vice president of the computer club, which allowed him to work on interesting group projects with his peers.*

Providing Appropriate Support

The manner in which school staff members provide instruction and support to students with severe disabilities can inadvertently hinder opportunities for students with and without disabilities to get to know one another. The widespread reliance on individually assigned, one-to-one adults—usually paraprofessionals—to support students can discourage peers from interacting with these students or can diminish the need for students with disabilities to turn to peers for help (Carter, Moss, Hoffman, Chung, & Sisco, 2011; Han & Chadsey, 2004). The close proximity or intensive involvement of an adult also can make peers reluctant to initiate interactions and reinforce the perception that the focus student is different. These practices can send the message that conversations must always be channeled through a third person, particularly as students grow older and become accustomed to working more independently. In community-based work experiences, the excessive proximity of a job coach can yield similar effects among co-workers and customers. Giangreco and colleagues (Giangreco,

Carter, Doyle, & Suter, 2010; Giangreco, Doyle, & Suter, 2012) have raised a number of concerns with excessive one-to-one adult support, including (a) increased separation from classmates, (b) unnecessary dependence on adults, (c) reduced interactions with peers, (d) diminished academic engagement, (e) limited self-determination, and (f) insular relationships with adults. School staff should reflect carefully on the manner in which they provide direct support, providing "just enough" support to enhance participation, but not any more than is necessary. Instead of assuming an adult should be the first line of support, Carter, Cushing, and Kennedy (2009) suggest first considering whether students can do an activity (a) on their own, (b) if given the right technology or adaptive equipment, (c) if provided with some additional skill instruction, (d) if taught self-management strategies, (e) with help from a peer, or (f) with help from someone else in the setting. Adult support is introduced only when these other avenues of support prove to be insufficient.

EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING RELATIONSHIPS

With these elements in mind, the remainder of this chapter focuses on promising and evidence-based strategies for increasing interactions and fostering relationships among students with severe disabilities and their peers in each of the four contexts in which students spend their day: (a) inclusive general education classrooms; (b) informal contexts; (c) extracurricular and school-sponsored activities; and (d) after school, on weekends, and during the summer. A wide variety of strategies for promoting social interactions and peer relationships have been described or evaluated in the professional literature. This chapter will focus on those that have strong evidence of effectiveness and acceptability to key stakeholders.

Inclusive General Education Classrooms

The general education classroom has clearly emerged as the recommended setting for providing access to a challenging academic curriculum, promoting involvement in relevant learning experiences, and fostering relationships among students (Ryndak, Jackson, & White, 2013; Carter, Huber, & Brock, 2014). Although inclusive classrooms offer numerous *potential* opportunities for students with and without severe disabilities to work together, interact with one another, and establish relationships with peers, those opportunities typically go unrealized unless intentional planning and well-designed supports are in place. Among the educational objectives addressed throughout the school day, it is essential that educators identify supportive and meaningful avenues through which students can get to know each other and learn alongside each other. Such supports should also be evaluated on a regular basis and adjusted as needed.

Peer Support Strategies

One of the most widely implemented approaches to supporting the classroom participation of students with severe disabilities involves the individual assignment of adults, such as paraprofessionals, special educators, or related service providers. Yet, an overreliance on one-to-one adult assistance can often (and inadvertently) limit the opportunities students have to interact with and get to know one another. Peer support strategies offer a promising alternative to the exclusive reliance on adult-delivered support within inclusive classrooms. Broadly defined, peer support strategies involve arranging for students without disabilities to provide ongoing social and academic support to their same-age classmates with severe disabilities while receiving the necessary guidance and assistance from school staff (Carter, Cushing, & Kennedy, 2009; Carter & Kennedy, 2006). These approaches vary widely with regard to their primary

focus (e.g., social or academic participation) and intensity. For example, teachers might informally pair students together or implement more structured tutoring approaches. Indeed, these strategies have emerged as an evidence-based approach for increasing social interactions, expanding students' social networks, and promoting new friendships among students with and without disabilities within inclusive classrooms (Carter, Moss, Hoffman, Chung, & Sisco, 2011).

Although peer support strategies should always be tailored to meet the individualized instructional and support needs of students with severe disabilities, the following steps typically are taken when establishing these arrangements.

First, educators should begin by identifying students with and without disabilities who might benefit from involvement in peer support arrangements. Students with severe disabilities who need additional assistance to participate in class activities, experience few peer interactions during class, or have few friendships are especially likely to benefit from these support strategies. One or more peers without disabilities are then identified from within the same classroom to participate. Although there are no established criteria for who makes an effective peer support, educators often identify classmates who already know the student, have expressed interest in assuming these roles, have consistent attendance, share interests in common with the student, work well with others, and evidence a willingness to learn new skills. While teachers tend to invite academically high-performing students to serve in peer support roles, research suggests average- or low-performing students may benefit as much or more and are similarly effective in these roles (Carter, Asmus, & Moss, 2014; Carter & Kennedy, 2006). Moreover, students with disabilities—particularly during adolescence—should have a voice in determining from whom and how they receive support throughout the school day.

Second, students are oriented to their roles and responsibilities as peer supports. For example, peers may be provided with general information about a student's strengths, interests, and educational goals; basic strategies for supporting academic and social participation; strategies for supporting communication device or other technology use; ideas for promoting interactions with other classmates; suggestions for providing feedback and encouragement; and guidance on when to turn to adults for assistance. In peer support approaches that more heavily emphasize instructional arrangements, such as peer tutoring or academic coaching, peers may be taught more systematic approaches for providing instruction (Jameson, McDonnell, Polychronis, & Riesen, 2008; Jimenez, Browder, Spooner, & Dibiase, 2012). When social participation is the primary emphasis, conversation-enhancing skills may be more relevant for students to learn (Kamps, Lopez, & Golden, 2002; Weiner, 2005). It is equally important to be sure students with severe disabilities know how to request and decline support from their peers, as well as understand the roles peers will play. Equipping students with this initial information and these skills increases their confidence in and comfort with their new roles.

Third, students are provided with regular opportunities to work and interact within ongoing class activities. This involves first arranging for students to sit next to each other or within the same small group. As students work together, peers then support class participation and learning by sharing materials, assisting with in-class activities, reviewing the accuracy of work, sharing additional examples of a key idea, highlighting important concepts, and offering constructive feedback. Peers also support social goals by initiating interactions, reinforcing communication attempts, modeling social skills, making introductions to other classmates, conversing about shared interests, and encouraging participation in class discussions. Typically, the specific avenues through which students will support each other are detailed in a written support plan at the start of the semester that is revisited as often as needed (Carter, Asmus, & Moss, 2014). For example, Figure 11–3 shows a completed support plan for Destiny. For each classroom routine, the team outlines the expectations for all students in the class, the adaptations and supports needed by the student with disabilities, and the roles peers will play in providing some of these supports.

FIGURE 11–3
Example Peer Support Plan

Brief description of student's goals for participation in the class:

Destiny will participate in science class by:

- Completing adapted and/or modified assignments
- Listening to instruction and answering questions
- Working with her peers to complete lab activities

At the beginning of class…

The student could:	*Classmates could:*	*The facilitator could:*
• Bring her textbook, binder, and pencil to class	• Stop by Destiny's locker to make sure she has materials	• Stand at a distance from Destiny's locker and support Destiny/peers if needed
• Greet her peers	• Greet her and introduce her to friends in the hall on the way to class	• Remind peers of Destiny's interests and possible conversation topics
• If necessary, sharpen her pencil	• Prompt her to sharpen her pencil if needed	• Monitor Destiny and peers to make sure they are prepared for class and are interacting in a positive way
• Sit down and talk with peers until class begins	• Engage her in conversation about common interests or school events	

When there are lectures or whole-group instruction…

The student could:	*Classmates could:*	*The facilitator could:*
• Sit quietly and listen	• Encourage Destiny to sit quietly and listen	• Monitor Destiny and peers and step in if Destiny does not sit quietly and listen or copy words when prompted by peers
• Copy highlighted key words from peers notes	• Highlight 4-5 key words in their notes for Destiny to copy	• Help peers select 4-5 key words
• Listen when peers summarize directions	• Encourage Destiny to copy key words	• Work on adapting or modifying the next activity for Destiny
	• If directions are given, quietly whisper summary of directions to Destiny	

When there are small group or lab activities…

The student could:	*Classmates could:*	*The facilitator could:*
• Actively participate by getting out materials and helping to carry out the activity	• Find ways that Destiny can participate successfully that involve minimal reading and writing	• Suggesting to peers ways that Destiny could participate and contribute to lab activity
• Recording key words on her lab sheet	• Read the directions to the lab out loud to Destiny	• Help peers to identify key words
	• Highlighting 2-3 key words on their lab sheet for Destiny to copy	• If necessary, help peers to modify expectations for Destiny so she can participate successfully

When there is independent seatwork…

The student could:	*Classmates could:*	*The facilitator could:*
• Work on an adapted or modified assignment	• Focus first on their own work	• Provide Destiny with an adapted or modified assignment

When there is independent seatwork…

- Complete as much as possible independently before turning to a peer adult for help (e.g., skip a tricky question and come back to it later)
- Check in with Destiny every few minutes to see how she is progressing, encourage her to keep working, and help her if necessary
- Briefly explain adaptations or modifications to peers
- Encourage peers to focus first on their own work, but to check in with Destiny intermittently

At the end of class…

The student could:	*Classmates could:*	*The facilitator could:*
• Help put away materials and collect own belongings	• Encourage Destiny to help clean up and collect her belongings	• Stand at a distance from Destiny's locker and support Destiny/peers if needed
• Say goodbye to her peers and to the general education teacher	• Walk with Destiny to her locker	• Thank peers and praise specific ways that they supported and interacted with Destiny
• Put her materials in her locker	• Engage Destiny in conversation in the hallway, and introduce her to friends	

Big Ideas for Peers

- Get to know your partner…ask lots of questions and find out what he or she enjoys.
- Involve your partner in conversations with other classmates—interacting with others is an important goal
- Look for opportunities to involve your partner in class activities, even in small ways
- Make sure you complete your own work; learning the class material is still your priority

Specific Ways to Offer Support

When Destiny is off task during independent work time, use this strategy to help get her back on track:

1. Without using words, show Destiny what she should be doing by pointing or modeling
2. Take 3 deep breaths and see if Destiny does what you encouraged her to do
3. Using words, encourage Destiny and explain to her what she should be doing
4. Take 3 deep breaths and see if Destiny does what you encourage her to do
5. If Destiny is still off task, ask an adult for help

If you notice that Destiny is doing the right thing during class, let her know that she is doing a good job. You can do this quietly by giving her a "thumbs up" or fist bump.

If you or other peers want to talk to Destiny but aren't sure what to talk about, remember that she loves to talk about:

- School sports teams
- Pop music stars
- Her pets (a dog and a cat)

When you are giving Destiny directions, remember that she does best when you only give her one direction at a time. Also, she is very good at watching what you are doing and imitating you, so when possible it is better to show her how to do something instead of just telling her.

Fourth, adults within the classroom (e.g., general educators, special educators, paraprofessionals) monitor students' progress to ensure they are benefiting socially and academically from their involvement. When additional support is needed for peer supports to feel confident in their roles, adults also provide it. For example, a paraprofessional might informally observe to determine whether students are engaged academically, interacting appropriately, and supporting one another effectively, as well as talk with the participating students to determine whether they have the information and direction they need. As students with and without severe disabilities gain

more experience working together, adults who previously provided one-to-one assistance gradually shift to a broader support role within the entire classroom. Because the manner in which peer support arrangements are established may influence the nature of the relationships that ultimately develop, it is important to pay close attention to the types of interactions students have within these arrangements to ensure they are mutually enjoyable and lead to valued relationships.

Research offers strong evidence of the efficacy and acceptability of these intervention strategies. Peer support strategies can enhance the communication skills of students with severe disabilities, increase the frequency and quality of their interactions with peers, provide greater access to an array of social supports, expand their social networks, and lead to the development of new friendships (Carter, Sisco, Melekoglu, & Kurkowski, 2007; Trottier, Kamp, & Mirenda, 2011). At the same time, classmates who serve as peer supports often report a substantial improvement in their attitudes toward and understanding of disabilities, improve their academic performance, and develop lasting friendships (Copeland et al., 2004; Carter, Moss, Hoffman, Chung, & Sisco, 2011).

Peer support interventions are also practical strategies that fit well within inclusive settings. Like other peer-mediated interventions, they draw on the one most readily available source of support in any classroom—other students. With some initial guidance, most students are quite adept at implementing basic academic and social support strategies, as well as brainstorming ways of enhancing their partner's active participation in class activities. These interventions also enable teachers to differentiate instruction and offer individualized support within heterogeneous classrooms without requiring broader changes in instructional delivery. For paraprofessionals, these interventions define more clearly the avenues through which they can support students' success within the classroom.

Ms. Mosso, the special education teacher at Jefferson Middle School, took notice of the friendships Samuel was developing through his extracurricular involvement. Yet, she also was aware that Samuel still knew few of his classmates and was often on the periphery of class activities. Samuel depended heavily on the paraprofessional who had attended all of his classes with him since elementary school. Ms. Mosso and several of Samuel's classroom teachers met to brainstorm ways of involving other students more directly in supporting Samuel's class participation. Several members of the computer and comic book clubs were enrolled in some of the same classes as Samuel, so the teachers invited them to serve as peer supports within each of Samuel's classes. Ms. Mosso invited students to meet with her over two lunch periods to talk about some of the ways they could help Samuel participate more actively in class activities and introduce him to other classmates. As the students began working together, Samuel's paraprofessional continued to provide not only the additional support Samuel needed, but also offered guidance to the peer supports as various needs arose. Over the course of the semester, Samuel began to feel more like a true member of his classes and his friendships with his peer supports deepened further. Ms. Mosso continued to evaluate the impact of these peer support arrangements and made adjustments periodically to ensure all students were benefiting from their involvement.

Cooperative Instructional Arrangements

In many classrooms, teacher-led instruction (e.g., lecture, large-group discussion) and independent seatwork are among the primary avenues through which content is delivered. Establishing cooperative learning groups and other interdependent instructional arrangements may promote peer interaction among students with and without severe disabilities. These interventions typically involve dividing the class into smaller groups of four or five students, establishing a set of common learning goals each group works toward, delineating the specific and unique roles each student within the group will assume (e.g., timekeeper, checker, facilitator, recorder, artist), and establishing clear expectations all students must work together to accomplish (e.g., group accountability). Such arrangements provide regularly occurring interaction

opportunities, establish interdependent contingencies that reward collaborative work, and create a socially supportive environment for all students. Peer support arrangements can be embedded within cooperative learning groups by identifying one or more group members who receive additional information and guidance on how to support the active participation of a classmate with severe disabilities. Students may need explicit instruction on how to work together and support one another effectively. To this end, educators should establish clearly defined roles and responsibilities for students, as well as teach them to provide helpful feedback to each other in effective ways (e.g., providing positive feedback first, suggesting alternatives instead of providing directives, providing constructive responses).

Elena loved being in control! Mr. Bauer had always relied heavily on cooperative groups to promote learning within his classroom. But when he learned Elena would be in his class, he wasn't exactly sure how to meaningfully involve her in small-group activities. Mr. Bauer met with the special education teacher and speech language pathologist to learn more about Elena's educational goals and brainstorm ways of involving her more fully. Several of Elena's goals focused on increasing her communication skills and AAC device use, as well as promoting social interactions with classmates. Mr. Bauer assigned Elena two important roles within the classroom. First, she was assigned the role of discussion facilitator, which meant she decided who Mr. Bauer would call on when groups shared their answers with the rest of the class. The speech language pathologist helped input the names of all of the classmates into Elena's iPad. This made her the most popular girl in the class because students who liked getting called on—and those who definitely did not—made sure to stay on Elena's good side. Second, Mr. Bauer assigned Elena and another peer the responsibility for managing materials for the weekly science lab. To complete their science experiments, every student had to interact with Elena and her peer. This gave Elena and her classmates a chance to get to know each other and provided a natural opportunity for Elena to practice using her AAC device.

Adult Facilitation Strategies

Paraprofessionals, special educators, general educators, and other adults should be proactive by encouraging and reinforcing interaction and collaborative work among students with and without severe disabilities. However, adults often end up serving as "intermediaries" between students with and without disabilities instead of "bridge builders" or "facilitators" (Causton-Theoharis & Malmgren, 2005; Rosetti & Goessling, 2010). A number of simple but proactive steps can be taken to increase both the quantity and quality of the interactions taking place among students within the classroom, as well as during other aspects of the school day (Downing, 2005b; Ghere, York-Barr, & Sommerness, 2002). Examples of these supportive strategies include the following:

- Modeling ways for students to initiate, maintain, and extend conversations
- Demonstrating how to converse with someone using an AAC device
- Highlighting shared interests, strengths, experiences, or other similarities among students
- Teaching and prompting critical social interaction skills (e.g., initiating a conversation, greeting classmates, requesting help, refusing support)
- Redirecting peers' questions and comments away from the adult and to the student with disabilities (and vice versa)
- Interpreting the communicative intent of non-verbal or challenging behaviors, as well as suggesting appropriate responses to those communication attempts
- Highlighting students' strengths in and contributions to small-group and other projects
- Assigning classroom responsibilities requiring frequent interaction (e.g., small-group assignments, cooperative projects)
- Relocating students so they sit together and remain in close physical and social proximity

These discrete facilitation strategies can substantially increase the frequency of peer interaction by creating additional opportunities for students to converse, addressing attitudinal and other barriers to interaction, and communicating to all students the importance and value of getting to know one another. However, the incidental lessons adults communicate are equally important to consider. Peers often take their cue from the ways in which adults interact with their classmates with disabilities. When adults use affirming and age-appropriate language, model respectful interactions, and communicate high expectations for students with disabilities, peers may be more likely to echo these same behaviors. When peers observe patronizing or caregiving behaviors and childish language, they also are likely to follow suit.

It took a little time for Elena's classmates to feel comfortable and confident communicating with someone who used an AAC device. After all, this was a new experience for most of them. Ms. Bauer looked for opportunities to encourage interactions between Elena and her peers. When a classmate asked her a question about Elena, Ms. Bauer would respond, "I bet Elena can answer that question better than I can!" When Elena turned to Ms. Bauer for help, she would say, "Go ahead and compare your answers to Olivia's. She can check if your answers are correct." When peers appeared uncertain about how to ask for Elena's feedback, Ms. Bauer might say, "Try rephrasing it as a 'yes' or 'no' question; Elena is still learning to use her communication device." And when she learned a classmate shared something in common with Elena, Ms. Bauer was quick to point it out, "I didn't realize you liked the Percy Jackson books. You should talk with Elena . . . she is the biggest fan I know."

Self-Directed Intervention Strategies

Recognition of the importance of fostering self-determination among children and youth with disabilities has led to the development of strategies students with severe disabilities can use to expand their peer interactions. Students can learn to self-direct their own social behavior using a combination of self-management strategies, such as goal-setting, self-prompting, self-instruction, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation (Lee, Simpson, & Shogren, 2007). For example, students may be taught to initiate interactions by using a picture book depicting conversational cues, to use self-instruction to rehearse and start conversations in the hallways, to self-monitor the extent to which they greet their classmates, or to self-monitor their use of important interaction skills. These self-directed strategies have been shown to have several potential effects: (a) increased independence, (b) decreased reliance on others to initiate conversations, (c) elevation of expectations for what students with severe disabilities can accomplish on their own, and (d) decreased extensive reliance on educators for constant support (e.g., Hughes et al., 2013). Most importantly, these self-directed strategies are highly portable and can be used throughout the day.

Samuel was always forgetting to bring his book and other materials to class. And Mr. Franklin was tired of reminding Samuel or sending him back to his locker to retrieve his things. Mr. Franklin asked one of Samuel's classmates to show him the checklist she kept in her folder that reminded her of everything she needed for each class. She helped him create his own checklist and soon Samuel came to love ticking off each item on his list. Mr. Franklin suggested a couple of additions to Samuel's checklist, including items related to greeting his peers, asking questions in class, and contributing to class discussions. Samuel referred to the list each day and gradually became less dependent on his teachers to participate actively in class activities.

Informal School Contexts

Although students spend most of their school day in the classroom, it is equally important to attend to those less structured times during which spending time conversing and "hanging out" with peers are the primary focus. Lunch, recess, breaks between classes, homeroom, and unstructured times before and after school typically

offer numerous interaction opportunities. Observational studies, however, suggest these may represent the school contexts during which students with severe disabilities remain most isolated from their peers without disabilities (Dore, Dion, Wagner, & Brunet, 2002; Carter, Hughes, Guth, & Copeland, 2005; Kemp & Carter, 2002).

Lunch Group Strategies

In most schools, the lunch period offers a relatively unstructured context rich with opportunities for students to spend time together, converse socially, and meet with peers whom they might not encounter during classes or outside of school. In some middle and high schools, students are free to spend lunch outside of the cafeteria, in the courtyard, hallways, classrooms, or even off-campus. Despite these potential opportunities, students with severe disabilities often spend their lunch period sitting at separate tables with other students with disabilities, eating exclusively with adults (e.g., special educators, paraprofessionals) or arriving at the cafeteria much earlier or later than the other students.

Intentional efforts to organize informal gatherings of students during lunch can reduce students' isolation and provide a natural avenue to expand their social networks (Carter et al., 2013; Hochman, Carter, Bottema-Beutel, Harvey, & Gustafson, in press; Kamps, Lopez, & Golden, 2002). Often referred to as a "lunch bunch" within elementary and middle schools, these interventions typically focus on increasing the social networks of an individual or a small number of students with severe disabilities. As with peer support strategies, students with disabilities should be asked about their interest in participating in a lunch group and be encouraged to suggest peers to invite. These interventions typically involve identifying regular times and locations where students will spend lunch together and inviting peers who already know or share a class with the focus student(s). Adults then organize initial introductory activities that help students better get to know each other and define the primary focus of the group (e.g., eating lunch together, hanging out, playing games, planning activities related to shared interests). Peers are encouraged to invite other friends to join the group and, gradually, greater responsibility for maintaining the group is turned over to participating students. Adults are active in the organization and initiation of groups and then assume a monitoring role. Adults should have as limited direct involvement in the group as possible, providing support only when absolutely necessary (e.g., interactions are inappropriate, challenging behavior occurs). Concurrently, it is advantageous to focus instruction on relevant social, leisure, and other collateral skills (e.g., board, card, or computer games) outside of the cafeteria that will enhance the quality of the interactions students with disabilities have within these groups. Participating peers may also benefit from learning basic strategies for eliciting, responding to, and reinforcing the social and communication skills of the focus students.

Peer Network Strategies

As students progress through late elementary, middle, and high school, they begin to participate in a wider range of classes daily, each of which are led by different teachers and are made up of a different cadre of peers. Relationships evident in one classroom may not automatically extend to other classrooms or non-instructional contexts apart from deliberate programming because peers may be enrolled in different classes, follow different bell schedules, or participate in different extracurricular activities. Peer network interventions offer a promising approach for addressing social needs beyond the classroom and across the school day by establishing cohesive social groups around a particular focus student (Carter et al., 2013; Gardner et al., 2014; Haring & Breen, 1992; Mason, Kamps, Turcotte, Cox, Feldmiller, & Miller, 2014). The following process is typically used to establish these networks.

Peer network interventions are implemented only after first talking with the focus student—as well as his or her parents—to determine an interest in participating and to solicit suggestions with regard to the focus and composition of the network. For

example, peer networks might focus on a particular time of the day (e.g., recess, breaks), the broader school day (e.g., classes, extracurricular activities), after-school activities, or any combination of these. A small group of peers without disabilities—typically four to six students—are then invited to an initial meeting to organize the network. Peers who already know the focus student, attend classes together, share interests or experiences in common, have had prior interactions, and/or are themselves part of established social networks often are recommended as potential participants. Teachers, paraprofessionals, and other school staff who know the student well can be asked to suggest peers who fit these descriptions. However, the preferences of the focus student should always be sought and regularly revisited as part of any peer-mediated intervention.

During the first meeting with peers, the adult who is facilitating the group typically shares the rationale for the peer network, provides background on the focus student(s) (e.g., interests, hobbies, talents, preferences, school and community activities), offers guidance regarding the roles students should and should not assume, and answers any questions the peers have. Students may or may not be part of this initial orientation. Next, participating students discuss their daily schedules, including the courses they are taking; the extracurricular activities in which they are involved; and the places where they spend time between classes, at lunch, and before or after school. Based on their schedules, the students determine the times of day and the school activities during which they will spend time with the focus student, as well as establish a regular meeting for the group. Although the goal is to identify at least one peer whom the focus student will know and spend time with across different aspects of the school day, peers are encouraged to introduce the student to their own network of friends. The focus student is then introduced to this network and peers begin spending time together. During subsequent meetings of the peers, the students adjust their schedules as needed; share ideas for providing social support, expanding the size of the peer network, and increasing the student's involvement in additional school activities; and collectively resolve any challenges that may arise. For example, peers might exchange ideas for conversation topics, engaging activities, or addressing challenging behaviors. Although an adult is present at these meetings of peers, their role should be to facilitate instead of lead the meeting and encourage students to assume increasing responsibility for sustaining the network.

Why might these approaches work? Students with severe disabilities are introduced into an existing network of peers, each of whom makes introductions to other students in the school that they know. In addition, students receive the additional support and encouragement they may need to participate more independently and meaningfully in the everyday life of their school. Through these shared activities, they develop friendships with peers in their network and encounter additional students who they might not otherwise meet. Finally, the support and information available through the network meetings increase the peers' confidence in interacting with students who perhaps communicate in unfamiliar or unconventional ways.

Extracurricular and Other School-Sponsored Activities

Involvement in extracurricular activities (e.g., helping with the school yearbook, contributing to service activities, working on the homecoming float, competing in an athletic event, or performing in a drama production) becomes more prominent as students grow older and often is among the school experiences students enjoy the most. Supporting involvement in extracurricular and other school activities enables students to meet new peers who share similar interests, promotes a sense of belonging and connection to a larger group, and creates a context in which students can develop new skills and interests that provide lifelong enjoyment (Carter, Swedeen, Moss, & Pesko, 2010). Although the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 directs IEP teams to consider the aids, services, and other supports

students with disabilities need to "participate in extracurricular and other nonacademic activities" (§300.320(a)(4)(ii)), most students with severe disabilities have fairly limited involvement in these activities (Kleinert, Miracle, & Sheppard-Jones, 2007; Wagner, Cadwallader, Garza, & Cameto, 2004).

Educators should be intentional about connecting students with disabilities to extracurricular activities and ensuring they are equipped with the skills, supports, and opportunities needed to participate meaningfully in these school offerings and in ways that will foster relationships. Although there have been few empirical studies addressing access to extracurricular activities for students with severe disabilities, the literature suggests several steps planning teams might take (Carter, Swedeen, Moss, & Pesko, 2010; Hughes & Carter, 2008). These include (a) identifying extracurricular opportunities that build on or expand students' interests and strengths; (b) determining the expectations and support needs associated with identified activities; (c) equipping students with information, skills, and supports that would enhance their participation; (d) preparing activity sponsors and peers to support the involvement and contributions of students; (e) keeping families informed about opportunities and logistical issues; and (f) reflecting regularly on the experiences students have to ensure intended benefits accrue.

As with classroom-based peer support strategies, it can be advantageous to identify peers who already participate in club activities to provide social and practical support instead of automatically arranging for one-to-one assistance from a paraprofessional or other adult. Peers might be involved in assisting students with getting to and from club activities, helping students learn expected routines, supporting partial participation, making introductions to other peers, or working together on a specific club-related task. Club or activity sponsors can also take steps to foster positive relationships among all students by structuring team-building and other early opportunities for students to learn more about each other and work together on collaborative tasks.

Schools may also establish new clubs or informal networks that engage students and create opportunities for students to get to know one another. For example, educators might create inclusive, social-focused clubs designed around recreational and service activities to encourage relationship building and expand school or community involvement (e.g., a peer partners club). Or, they might help students develop self-advocacy or disability-focused clubs in order to create a context in which youth with and without disabilities can develop new relationships, learn together about disability-related issues, and develop skills that enhance their self-determination.

Regardless of the avenue of extracurricular involvement, educators should consider logistical and support issues carefully, including the accessibility of activity events and locations, the availability of transportation, potential scheduling conflicts (e.g., interference with after-school jobs or other events), and the availability of needed adaptive equipment or communication devices. Conversations with families about extracurricular participation also are particularly important because parents may be hesitant to encourage involvement if they have concerns about safety or worry that their child will not be welcomed by peers or well supported in activities (Murphy & Carbone, 2008). Educators can strengthen family support for extracurricular involvement by keeping parents informed of existing opportunities and upcoming activities, communicating the importance and value of extracurricular involvement, and sharing feedback on the contributions their child is making in the group and the peer relationships he or she is developing.

Aloura loved working on the "set team" for the school play. It gave her a chance to explore her creative side and an opportunity to meet other students with whom she didn't share any classes. Initially, Aloura's special education teacher, Ms. Horne, accompanied her to the first few after-school meetings. Ms. Horne tried to stay in the background, taking inventory of the types of support Aloura might need to continue attending independently. Ms. Horne talked with the drama and art teachers to learn more about what the set team would be doing and to share some ways Aloura might

contribute to those efforts (e.g., finding scene design examples online, painting flats). They also discussed some of Aloura's medical issues and Ms. Horne shared an information sheet describing steps that should be taken if Aloura were to have a seizure. Ms. Horne asked if she could speak with several of the peers who would be working with Aloura in order to provide some background about her interests and strengths, as well as to answer any questions they might have. Because many of the team's activities took place after school, Ms. Horne and Aloura's parents worked out transportation issues in advance. Aloura had a wonderful experience contributing to the success of the play and was thrilled to be recognized for her contributions on opening night.

After School, on Weekends, and During the Summer

As students become older, their interactions with peers increasingly extend beyond the school day. Involvement in sports and recreational programs; organized community groups (e.g., scouting, 4-H); activities offered through faith communities; summer camps; volunteering; and informal social events with friends (e.g., going to the movies, playing video games, shopping at the mall) represent just a sampling of the ways in which most children and youth spend their time outside of school. Although these out-of-school activities often are the contexts in which friendships develop, they rarely are addressed explicitly as part of educational planning and are accessed infrequently by children and youth with severe disabilities.

Mapping Inclusive Opportunities

Parents and practitioners sometimes have limited awareness of the inclusive activities that already exist or that might be developed within their communities. School staff and community members can collaborate to identify and create a "map" of the formal and informal programs and activities that might be accessed by children and youth with disabilities in their local community. Community resource mapping typically involves compiling information about both the disability-specific and generically available programs in a local community, along with the services and supports that could be drawn on in order to support participation (Swedeen, Carter, & Molfenter, 2010). Although many community activities and programs may not currently be inclusive, the professional literature offers guidance for refining programs and providing the needed supports within summer programs and camps, recreational activities, children's programs and youth groups sponsored by faith communities, and after-school programs (e.g., Carter, 2007; Schleien & Miller, 2010).

Intentional Planning

Diligence to address out-of-school time or the summer months within educational planning efforts can help ensure students and their families have the information, supports, and connections needed to access a broader range of social opportunities in the community. Targeted discussions might focus on identifying inclusive recreation, leisure, and service opportunities; arranging potential school- and community-based supports; and addressing logistical issues such as transportation. For example, Carter, Trainor, Ditchman, Swedeen, and Owens (2009) evaluated the efficacy of intentional planning as part of an intervention package that focused on increasing the involvement of high school students with severe disabilities in summer work and community activities. Educators facilitated a planning process that involved identifying (a) a student's goals for after high school, (b) summer experiences that might further those long-term goals, (c) individuals who might be able to help the student connect to those experiences, and (d) supports or resources the student would need in order to participate meaningfully.

Collaborating with Families

Although the efforts educators make to foster relationships during the school day set the stage for after school, families typically are the primary support for students beyond the doors of the school. Collaborating with families is an essential element of

comprehensive efforts to foster relationships. Parents can play an important role in facilitating and supporting the interactions that take place beyond the school day by advocating for inclusion, supporting their child's participation in community activities, building and supporting friendship networks, and sharing information about their child (e.g., strengths, interests, commonalities) that will enhance participation. For example, parents might arrange playgroups or other shared activities involving other children (Jull & Mirenda, 2011). They can also enroll their child in community programs and offer suggestions to staff for working with their child. In addition, they might arrange transportation or use existing supports such as respite dollars to support their child in community activities. Schools should inform families of inclusive recreation, volunteer opportunities, and other community programs in their communities.

Technology and Social Media

The emergence and rapid expansion of new technologies are transforming the avenues through which children and youth interact with one another and keep in touch. For example, social networking sites, online communities, and other internet sites have become prominent avenues through which students meet one another, discover common interests, exchange information, and make social plans. Moreover, text messaging, email, video chat, and other technologies expanded the ways in which students communicate with one another outside of the school day, regardless of transportation or geographical challenges (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). Ensuring these new technologies enhance the social connectedness of students with severe disabilities—instead of isolate them further—will require careful planning. To date, there is limited research exploring how best to harness these emerging technologies to promote peer relationships (Mazurek & Wenstrup, 2013; Zhao & Qiu, 2011). Students with severe disabilities will benefit from systematic instruction in the use of social technologies, guidance on appropriate social skills within digital interactions, opportunities to practice their use at school and at home, and well-designed adaptations to ensure technology remains accessible. Because peers often are more fluent in the use of these technologies, they may be more effective than adults at helping students with disabilities learn these communication modes. Opportunities to learn and use technology can be embedded throughout the school day and encouraged outside of school through peer networks.

MONITORING PROGRESS AND REFINING EFFORTS

The strategies described in this chapter hold great potential to promote a sense of belonging, foster classroom membership, and develop friendships. However, it should not be presumed these outcomes will accrue automatically simply because these strategies are implemented. Progress monitoring enables practitioners to make data-based decisions about whether to continue using the same strategy, refine or modify their efforts, or even switch to a completely different approach. Progress monitoring involves clearly defining the desired outcome(s) or intervention efforts, and designing a recording system that is feasible, manageable, and one that adequately captures the progress on the defined outcome(s).

Monitoring Interactions with Peers in Class

Frequency of Interactions

If one goal is to increase the number of times students with disabilities interact with peers, this outcome can be measured with a simple tally sheet. Teachers or paraprofessionals can monitor and tally the number of times the student and peers interact. In most cases, it is not necessary to collect such data every day for the entire class period. It may be more feasible and sustainable to collect data during certain activities when interactions are being targeted, or only on certain days of the week. Charting

this frequency over time reveals if interactions are trending upward, downward, or remaining the same. Depending on the student's goals, it might be useful to keep separate tallies of how many times a student initiates and responds to peers. By reviewing data by setting and activity, teachers can determine the contexts within which interactions are going particularly well or not so well.

Appropriateness and Quality of Interactions

In some cases, intervention efforts primarily target the quality, not just the quantity, of interactions. Sometimes, the goal is for students to interact in socially appropriate ways, or converse about topics outside of narrow, circumscribed interests. In these cases, it becomes important to differentiate between desired interactions (e.g., socially appropriate, on-topic) and undesired interactions (e.g., socially inappropriate, off-topic). Peers can often provide valuable insights into the distinction between these types of interactions. For example, peers might share that a student tends to talk only about certain favorite topics regardless of what they are asking her about, talks about age-inappropriate topics, or says things that make her peers feel uncomfortable. Summing and graphing each type of interaction can be helpful. In addition, teachers or paraprofessionals might supplement quantitative data by taking notes about the nature of socially inappropriate interactions. These notes can be very helpful when revising intervention efforts.

Monitoring Interactions with Peers Outside of Class

While adults are able to collect observational data in class, this is often more difficult in the hallway or in the cafeteria. Often, it is more feasible and less intrusive to ask peers who are involved in intervention efforts how many times they interacted with the student with a disability outside of class. Teachers or paraprofessionals can occasionally approach peers at the end of the day and ask them how many times they conversed with the student outside of class that day, and to recount one interaction that was the most memorable. This provides information about both the quantity and quality of out-of-class interactions without adults having to follow the student closely in the hallway or cafeteria, which might actually discourage peers from approaching and interacting with the student.

Monitoring Participation in Extracurricular Activities

Another important outcome might be quality of participation in extracurricular activities. Educational teams might consider regularly communicating with activity leaders or sponsors through informal conversations or written notes to monitor participation and troubleshoot if necessary. Important information to gather includes the degree to which the student participates or contributes to activities, perceived challenges or barriers to fuller participation, and the frequency with which the student interacts with peers in a positive way. Such information would allow an educational team to assess the quality of participation and, if necessary, adjust the student's support plan.

Monitoring Student and Family Satisfaction

While these progress-monitoring strategies can help document the success of intervention efforts, the best judge of success may be the student and his or her family. Educational teams should communicate often with them to understand the degree to which they are satisfied or have concerns. For students with complex communication challenges, it is important to closely monitor the student's non-verbal communication to discern how the student is enjoying interactions or activities with peers. Regular communication with families ensures they understand how the educational team is attempting to support the student to develop social relationships, and establishing dialogue provides families the opportunity to provide feedback that can shape future intervention efforts.

Aloura, Elena, and Samuel were all thriving socially in their schools. What suggests this was the case? Their teachers regularly reflected on the social experiences the students were having and collected data on outcomes. Aloura had more extended social contacts with her peers, increased her extracurricular involvement, and developed four new friendships. Elena was observed using her augmentative communication device regularly to greet her classmates, share ideas in class, and converse with peers on a much more regular basis. Samuel was more engaged and on-task in class; he spent less time working in close proximity to his paraprofessional; and he demonstrated good progress on his social-related IEP goals. Conversations with the students, their peers, and their parents also affirmed what the teachers had directly observed—that Aloura, Elena, and Samuel were valued members of peer groups and loved spending time with friends.

The services and supports we provide to students should reflect our commitment to ensuring every student has meaningful opportunities to experience a sense of belonging and enjoy satisfying relationships with their peers. This chapter described recommended and evidence-based strategies for promoting peer relationships within inclusive classrooms, informal school contexts, extracurricular activities, and after-school events. By implementing these strategies, educators, paraprofessionals, parents, and others can each play an influential role in equipping students with the skills and opportunities they need to develop lasting friendships.

LEARNING OUTCOME SUMMARIES

11.01 Contributions of Peer Relationships in the Lives of All Children

Learning Outcome

Articulate the importance of peer relationships in the learning and lives of students with severe disabilities.

Throughout their schooling, peer relationships play a prominent and powerful role in the lives of students with disabilities. In addition to bringing enjoyment and a sense of belonging, peers can provide a wide range of academic, social, and behavioral support that enhances learning and membership. They can offer strong models of appropriate social, communication, and self-determination skills. As peers without disabilities have opportunities to learn alongside and get to know their classmates with severe disabilities, their attitudes and expectations may also improve.

11.02 The Diversity of Peer Relationships

Learning Outcome

Describe the different types of relationships and interactions that might be fostered with peers.

Peer relationships refer to the interactions and associations students have with other children and youth who are of the same age. These relationships are reflected in many different ways—ranging from academic and social interactions in the classroom, friendships that extend beyond the school day, status relationships that have less reciprocity, peer group and social network affiliations, and romantic relationships. Such relationships can contribute to—or detract from—a sense of membership and belonging. In addition to connections with peers, relationships with professionals and other adults assume a particularly prominent role in the lives of students with severe disabilities.

11.03 The Importance of Intentional Efforts to Foster Relationships

Learning Outcome

Describe the prevailing relationship of students with severe disabilities when social-focused interventions are not in place.

For many students with severe disabilities, peer interactions and friendships that make school enjoyable are elusive. Descriptive studies consistently indicate that without intentional

efforts to facilitate shared learning and social connections, students with and without severe disabilities rarely interact with one another. Longitudinal studies focused on both the elementary and secondary levels suggest students with severe disabilities infrequently connect with friends and other peers beyond the school day.

11.04 Promoting Peer Interaction and Social Relationships

Learning Outcome

Identify approaches for assessing the social needs and opportunities of students.

A variety of approaches can be used to assess the social-related needs and interaction opportunities of students with severe disabilities. Schoolwide reflection approaches involve considering the extent to which students with and without severe disabilities participate in the same school settings, at the same times, while doing the same activities. For individual students, practitioners might carry out formal or informal observations within classrooms, extracurricular programs, and other informal school activities to determine whether and how students interact with their peers. Interviews with students with and without disabilities can provide insights into relationships students have, the nature of those relationships, and the ways they are perceived by others.

11.05 Strategies for Addressing Social Needs and Maximizing Relationship Opportunities

Learning Outcome

Explain key elements that set the occasion for friendships and durable relationships to develop.

A variety of factors can influence the extent to which students with and without disabilities have meaningful opportunities to get to know one another and develop positive relationships. These include shared space, shared activities, shared interests, student-focused instruction, peer-focused instruction, valued roles, and appropriate support.

11.06 Evidence-Based Strategies for Supporting Relationships

Learning Outcome

Describe evidence-based approaches for supporting relationships in and beyond the classroom.

Peer support strategies involve arranging for students without disabilities to provide ongoing social and academic support to their same-age classmates with severe disabilities while receiving the necessary guidance and assistance from school staff. Cooperative learning groups involve dividing a class into smaller groups, establishing a set of common learning goals each group works toward, delineating the specific and unique roles each student within the group will assume, and establishing clear expectations all students must work together to accomplish. Adult facilitation strategies involve proactively encouraging and reinforcing interaction and collaborative work among students with and without severe disabilities. Self-directed strategies involve teaching students to manage their own social behavior using a combination of self-management strategies (e.g., goal-setting, self-prompting, self-instruction, self-monitoring, self-evaluation). Peer networks address social needs beyond the classroom and across the school day by establishing cohesive social groups around a particular focus student that meet regularly with facilitation from an adult.

11.07 Monitoring Progress and Refining Efforts

Learning Outcome

Explain how to monitor the impact of intervention efforts to refine supports.

Progress monitoring involves clearly defining desired outcomes and designing recording systems that are feasible, manageable, and adequately capture a student's progress. Educators can collect data on the frequency, appropriateness, and quality of interactions within the classroom; social connections outside of instructional settings; participation in extracurricular and other school activities; and student and family satisfaction with implemented intervention efforts.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. Think about the friendships that you had during elementary, middle, and high school. Where did you meet each other for the first time? How long did it take for your relationships to become friendships? What factors contributed to that transition? Next, consider the extent to which the students with severe disabilities with whom you work have these same opportunities. What steps could you take to create or expand these opportunities?
2. Think about an individual with a severe disability who would benefit from intentional efforts to promote social relationships and school participation. Using the sample peer support plan in Figure 11–3 as a guide, begin to consider the opportunities this student currently has for social interaction. Reflect on the steps you might take to enhance the number of opportunities he or she has.
3. Choose one of the strategies for promoting social relationships and school participation in this chapter. Which adults would need to work together to successfully implement this strategy? What steps would you need to take together? Make a list of action steps.
4. Think about the strategy you selected in #3. How will you know if it is working? Reflect on the approaches to progress monitoring in this chapter; consider which outcomes are most critical and which approaches would be both feasible and sustainable.

PRACTICAL GUIDES AND RESOURCES

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