

# *Peer Network Programming and the Transition to Middle School*

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## We've Made Great Progress!

- PMI - recommended EB **communication** intervention approach; 30 years of research
- PMI is as an empirically supported **social intervention** (Bass & Mulick, 2007; Goldstein, et al., 2007; Chan et al., 2009)
- National Standards Project (2009) – **Peer Training Package** one of 11 Established Treatments [www.nationalautismcenter.org](http://www.nationalautismcenter.org)

## What we know...

- Social skills best predictor of positive, LT outcomes for kids with special needs
- Social competency gap widens as children progress through elementary grades (Prizant et al., 1997)
- Young adults with autism lack understanding of how to be a friend; report feeling lonely (Carrington et al., 2003)
- Intervention research in middle school is sorely lacking

## Specific Components of Peer-Mediated Interventions (PMI)

- Recruit 4 to 6 peers without disabilities
- Systematic adult-guided social skill instruction
- Natural social learning opportunities 3 to 4 times per week, across the school day
- Supportive social environment (e.g., student preferences, small groups, visual supports)
- More recently – written text and picture cues embedded within PMI

## Examples of Written Text and Picture Cues

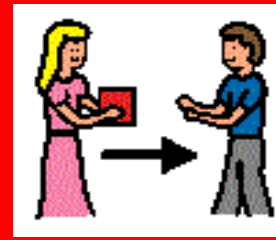
- Social Stories about target skill
- Single or multiple skill sheets with age-appropriate, "hip" social phrases
- Lanyards with target skills (portable)
- Topic cards and sentence starters with popular, cool pictures
- Student photos embedded within

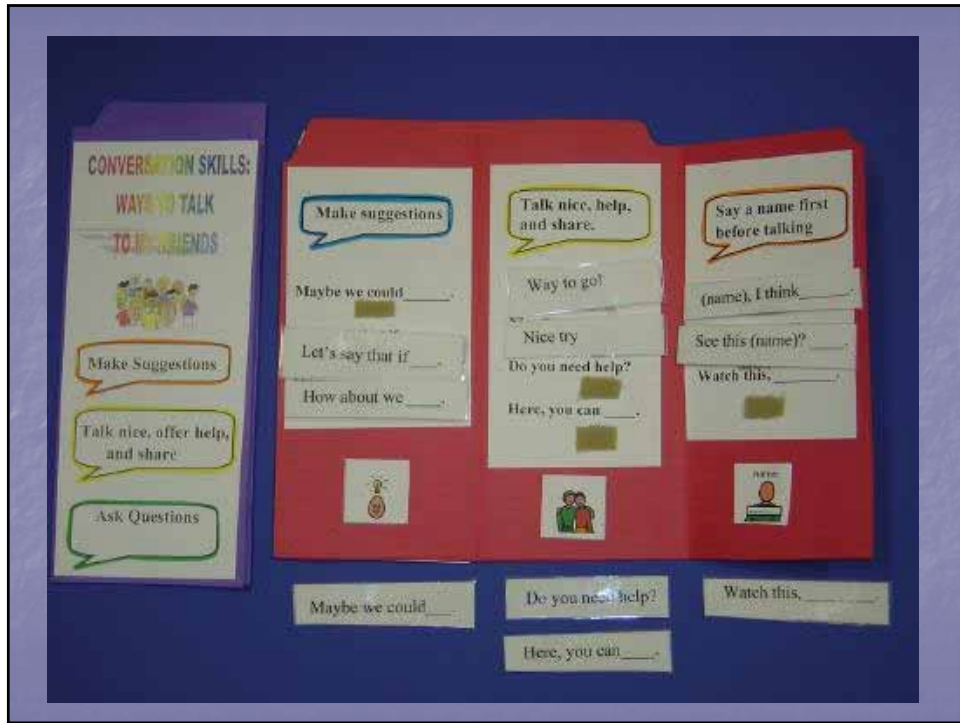
**Talk nice and share**

**You can go first**

**Way to go!**

**Nice try**





## Text Cues Targeting Two Skills



### Why include text and picture cues within PMI?

- Capitalize on visual and reading strengths
- Opportunities for repeated practice of language that matches the social context
- Leads to higher initiations, greetings, questions, comments, compliments, and longer conversations (Thiemann & Goldstein, 2001; 2004)
- Peers provide models, give feedback
- Peers aware of what child is trying to communicate and respond appropriately
- Decreases adult (prompt) dependency

## Measuring Social Changes

- Rates of targeted behaviors per minute
- Length of interactions
- Reciprocity within interactions – balanced?
- Peer social validity ratings
- Focus student social ratings
- Teacher and parent perceptions
- Involvement in extra curricular activities

## Participants

- 2 students with severe autism (1 boy, 1 girl)
  - First semester of 7<sup>th</sup> GR (13 yrs; middle school)
  - Life skills with inclusive specials and electives
  - Total treatment sessions – 12-14, over 2 months
- 4 to 5 peers recruited for each peer network
  - 1-2 peers from same elementary school
  - Both males and females
  - Same peers participate for entire project

## Recruiting Peers

- Willingness to participate
- Good school attendance
- Similar interests, electives, groupings
- Attended same elementary school (2-3)
- Same gender (majority)
- Socially outgoing, positive attitude
  - List criteria above, ask teacher to recommend

## The Peer's Role

- Be part of a support system that encourages social competencies and relationships
- 'Drive' the goal setting, scheduling, and monitoring progress of social interactions
- Model, prompt, and reinforce appropriate social behaviors across the school day
- Meet weekly to discuss goals and strategies
- Collect data and report to staff

## Peer Network Components

- Two initial 30 minute peer training sessions
  - Group purpose and contract – no focus on labels
  - Game preferences, potential goals, “hip” phrases
  - Match schedules, and train how to collect data
- Two 20-30 min meetings/week with all students
  - Structured game – peer led activity
  - End of week Team Meeting – strategies used, issues, suggestions, collect data sheets
- Daily practice across the day - 5-10 minutes
  - PE, chorus, hallways, transitions, lunch/cafeteria

## Structured Group Intervention Steps

- Students read social story about target skill
- Adult models and students rehearse two (more or less) text cues/scripts of social phrases
  - Text cues tell what to say *IN CONTEXT*
- Students role play and practice with each other
- 6 to 10 min game or activity - peers model skills and prompt student with autism to use
- Teacher assists as necessary to ensure many opportunities to practice target skill

## Parent Perceptions of Important Social Skills

- Skills ranked as *essential* by parents:
  - Greet and gain attention
  - Small talk (chit-chat)
  - Be friendly (offer support, compliments)
  - Be flexible (perseverative speech/topics)
  - Material aid/assisting others
  - Solve problems

## Peer Data Sheet Example Questions

1. Who said Hi or started talking first? Me My Buddy

2. The number of times my buddy **STARTED** talking first or asked me a question to **START** a conversation was \_\_\_\_\_.

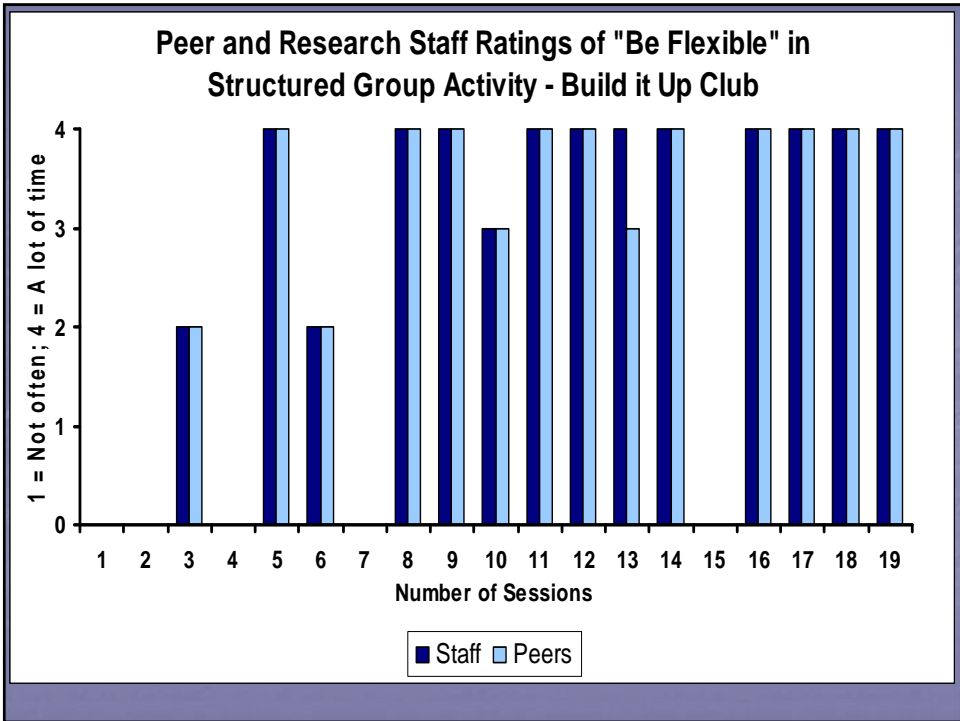
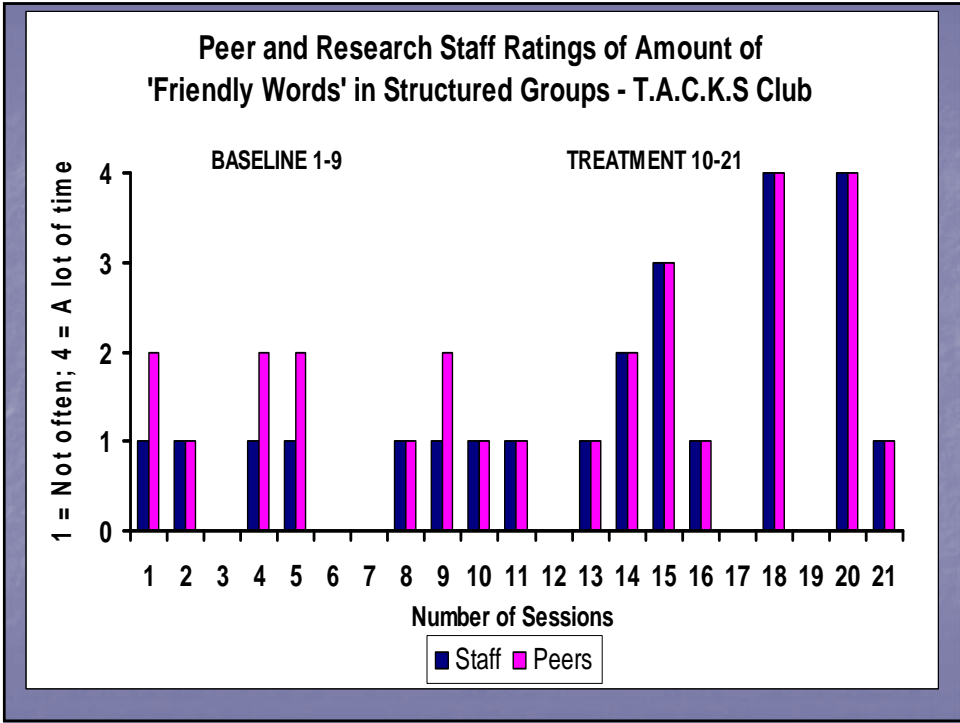
Not very often (0 to 2 Starts)    Sometimes (3 to 4 Starts)    Most of the time (5 to 6 Starts)    A lot of the time (7 or more Starts)

3. The total number of times my buddy **WAS FRIENDLY** and said nice things, shared, or was polite (gave you a compliment, cheered, let someone go first, said "please", "thank-you", or "sorry") was \_\_\_\_\_.

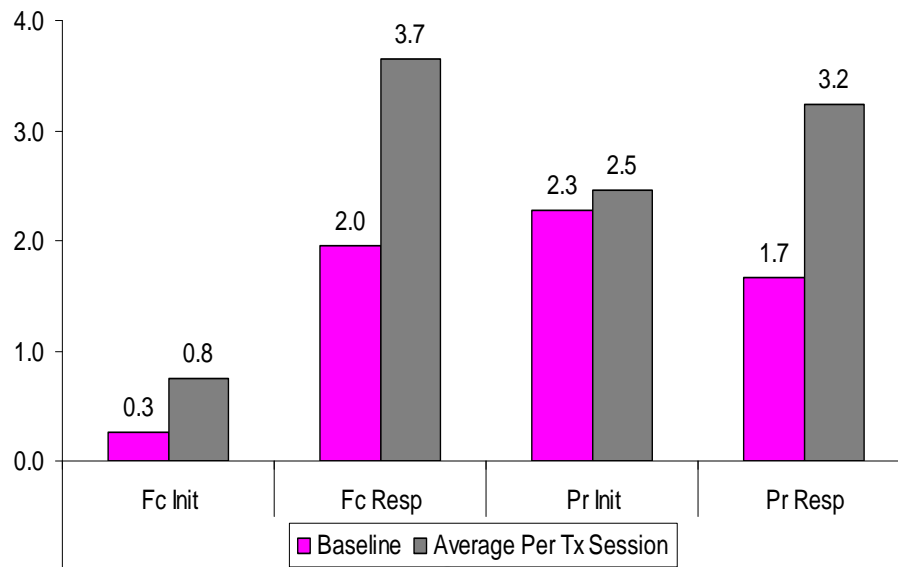
Not very often (0 to 2 nice words)    Sometimes (3 to 4 Nice words)    Most of the time (5 to 6 Nice words)    A lot of the time (7 or more)

4. My buddy seemed to be having fun and enjoyed hanging out with me (smiled, said nice words, laughed appropriately, stayed with me).

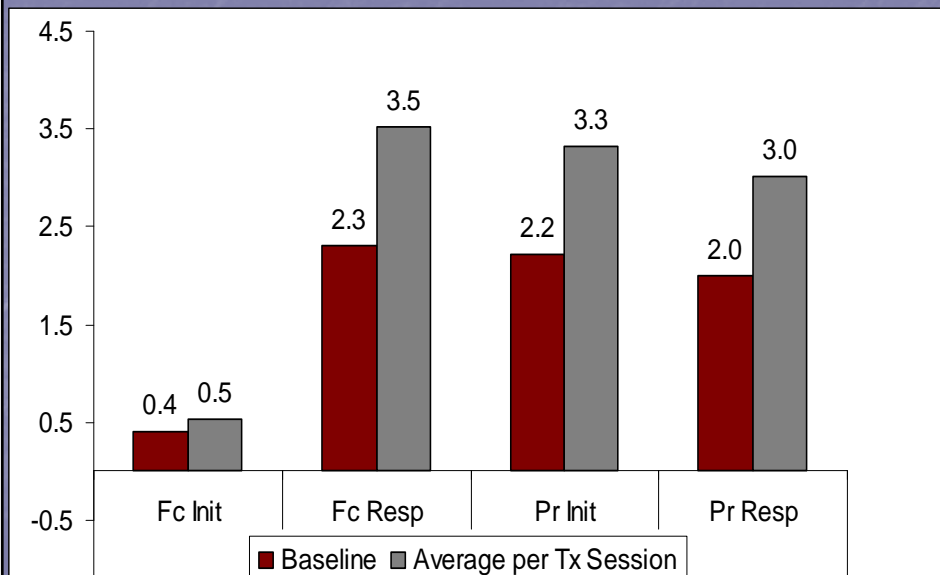
1                      2                      3                      4  
Not Really    A little bit    Most of the time    Very Much!!



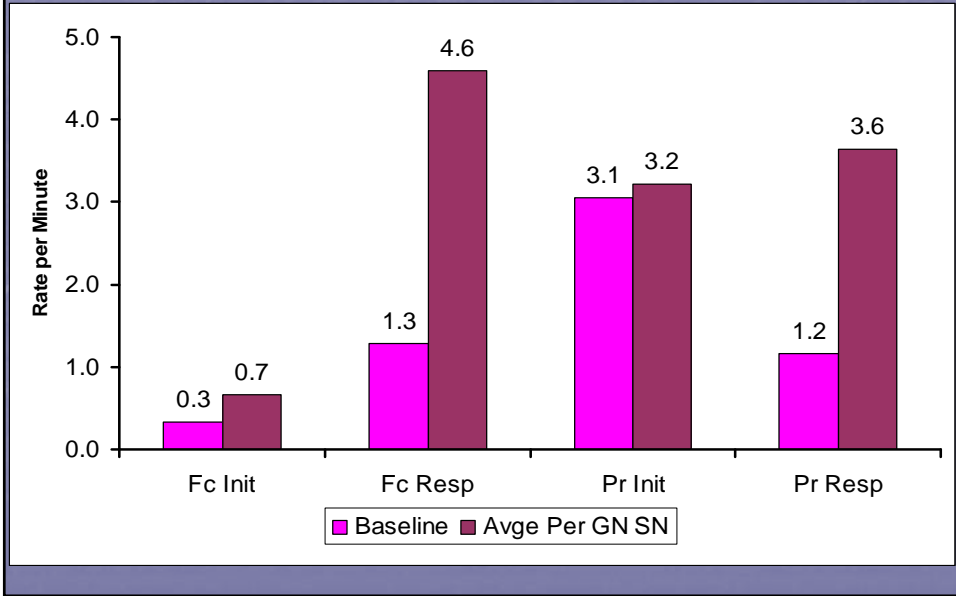
*T.A.C.K.S*: Initiations and Responses per minute – Structured Game



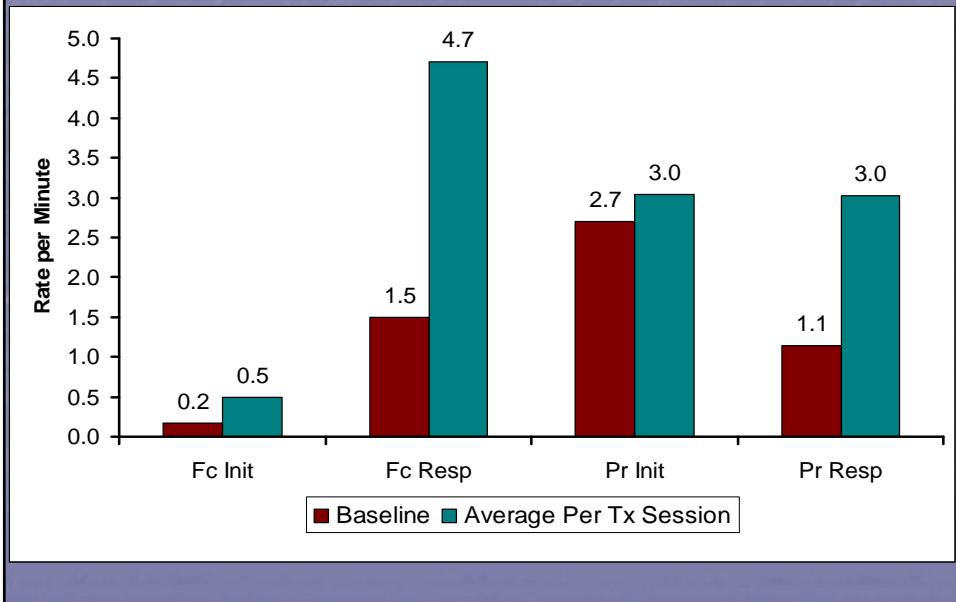
*Build It Up*: Initiations and Responses per minute – Structured Game



### T.A.C.K.S: Initiations and Responses per minute - Generalization Setting



### Build It Up: Rate of Initiations and Responses per min - Generalization Setting



## Weekly Meeting with *T.A.C.K.S Club*

Issues	Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Keeps talking about the same thing</li> <li>■ Uses bad words</li> <li>■ Tells us goodbye too soon</li> <li>■ Not knowing what to talk about</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Use cue cards (to help with other topics)</li> <li>■ Positive reinforcement; not give up</li> <li>■ Remind to only say goodbye at end of time</li> <li>■ Talk to new people</li> <li>■ Write words in bubbles; use topic cards; magazines</li> </ul>

## Weekly Meeting with *Build It Up Club*

Issues	Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Hard time starting a conversation</li> <li>■ Doesn't pay attention</li> <li>■ Talks about the same things</li> <li>■ Saying goodbye too early</li> <li>■ Doesn't want to talk to us or his friends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Ask him to ask a question first</li> <li>■ Ask, "What do you want to talk about?"</li> <li>■ Use words we were taught (e.g., "You already know that answer"; "Time to move on")</li> <li>■ Stay positive</li> </ul>

## Outcomes

- Peers reliably able to collect data on changes in social communication skills – great resource
- Peers able to lead groups and discussions
- Peer and focus child responsiveness increased – changes in reciprocity and length of interactions
- Longer interactions in generalization settings – plan from the beginning
- Peers reported they enjoyed the groups and would participate again

## Enhancing the Transition to Middle School

- Involve group of peers – let them 'drive'
- Meet with elementary and middle school staff in spring of elementary school
- Start groups early – within first 3 weeks of school; takes time to get peer permission
- Gain support of principal and staff – critical
- Expect and work around schedule changes - rotation of electives, semester changes, changes in assigned groupings

*"There's a difference between  
missing the moment, catching  
the moment, and making  
every moment count."  
Deepak Chopra*