



BUILDING CONNECTION AND COMMUNITY IN MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL SETTINGS




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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS TO...

- Colleagues at UNC's FPG Child Development Institute, UNC's Speech and Hearing Sciences, and UNC's School of Education
- Autistic individuals, service providers, caregivers, and family members who have contributed to this work
- Grants/Funding:
 - Center on Secondary Education for Students with Autism (CSESA; Grant# R324C120006 and #R324A180091 from the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education)
 - National Professional Development Center on Autism (NPDC) and Autism Focused Intervention Resources and Modules (AFIRM; Grants from the Office of Special Education Programming)
 - National Clearinghouse on Autism Evidence and Practice (NCAEP)

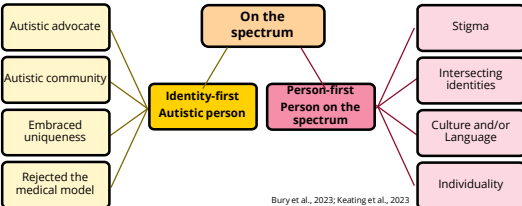
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AGENDA


- **How to Support Community & Connections: Structural & Cultural Changes at the School**
 - Neurodiversity Affirming Schools
 - Finding School Champions
 - Peer Mediated Interventions
- **Additional Resources to Support Implementation**
- **Questions & Discussion**



A NOTE ABOUT LANGUAGE...



Bury et al., 2023; Keating et al., 2023




DID YOU KNOW...

About ½ of ALL high school students report feeling disconnected from their school?

School connectedness is when students feel that adults and peers in a school care about their learning, as well as about them as individuals. This includes a sense of being cared for, being supported, and belonging at school (CDC, 2023).

Higher rates of disconnection for students with disabilities. Autistic students perceive that they are "... more bullied, less liked, less involved in interaction, less understood by teachers and more insecure in the school environment compared to peers" (Falkmer et al., 2012).



DID YOU KNOW...

That research indicates that a sense of school connectedness is an important protective factor for mental and emotional well-being? And is linked to positive affect, high self-esteem, and life satisfaction (CDC, 2023)?

That school connectedness may have long-lasting protective effect across multiple health outcomes related to mental health, violence, sexual behavior, and substance use (CDC, 2023)?

That those with stronger feelings of school connectedness were more likely to earn higher grades? (Hodges et al., 2022)



WHY MIGHT CONNECTEDNESS BE MORE DIFFICULT IN MIDDLE & HIGH SCHOOL?

Environmental complexities

- Changing classes/Bigger classes
- Teachers may not know students as well
- Students may not know each other as well
- Students coming from various schools

Social Complexities

- Increased emphasis on peer culture
- Peer interactions can be nuanced
- Assumptions around group learning



MY EXPERIENCE

- Limited knowledge and awareness of autism in the 1990s
- Sense of disconnect throughout primary school years
- What if I had the supports and acceptance we have today?



NEURODIVERSITY AFFIRMING SCHOOLS

Safe and inclusive school environments that recognize, celebrate, and accommodate the diverse range of developmental differences among students





Image credit: Dreamstime, arloo

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HOW DOES THIS HELP?

- **Shifts the burden of change**
 - How are we preparing the **broader community** to be supportive and inclusive of their future autistic colleagues, classmates, students, teachers, employees(ers), friends, partners, attendees, visitors...
 - Barriers to connection go well beyond individual skills
- **Positive identity development; collective identity**



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EXAMPLE

Instead of...	Consider this
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • goal choices that have a narrow focus on "normalizing speech" 	

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MY SPACES

- Library
- Art class



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FIND CHAMPIONS OF CONNECTION!

STAFF:

- Move beyond special education staff
- Staff with a personal interest in school connectedness
- Personal investment
- Staff with high social capital
- Club facilitators
- Connect students with teachers with similar interests/expertise



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FIND CHAMPIONS OF CONNECTION!

STUDENTS:

- Look for leadership or service-oriented groups/clubs
- Engage students who are already connected
- High social capital



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WHO ARE THE CHAMPIONS IN YOUR SETTING?

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MY CHAMPIONS

- Librarian
- Art teacher
- Principal

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PEER MEDIATED INTERVENTIONS

Engaging classmates & peers to provide mutual support in the classroom and purposefully build connections across the school

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CAUTIONS ABOUT PMI

Be aware of power dynamics – non-autistic peers are **NOT** “mini-therapists”- **mutual connection, sharing strengths of all involved, benefits for all**

NOT only centering neurotypical play, social interactions, communication patterns and pathologizing autistic behavior...


NOT putting burden of change only on autistic students

INFORMED SLP

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BENEFITS OF PMI

- Effective across a wide range of ages
 - Impact on connectedness
 - Impact on engagement
- Can implement across various settings within a school
- Availability and consistency of peers
- Positive benefits to ALL involved



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TYPES OF PMI

Peer Supports	Peer Networks
<p>Setting: In class – academic or specials</p> <p>Peers: 2-3 students per class</p> <p>Goals: Engagement, collaboration, academic, connectedness</p>	<p>Setting: Out of class – lunch, clubs, etc.</p> <p>Peers: 3-6 students in the network</p> <p>Goals: Engagement, connectedness, fun</p>

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STEPS FOR IMPLEMENTATION: PS

Peer Supports

1. Identify goals for group
2. Identify and ask group members
3. Develop a peer support plan
4. Orient students to their role
5. Implement peer supports in classroom
6. Ongoing facilitating by staff

Small Group Centered
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase student interactions in class
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase student involvement in classroom activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage students to receive some support from peers rather than always turning to adults for help
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide students a chance to get to know and interact with each other on a regular basis

STEPS FOR IMPLEMENTATION: PN

Peer Networks

1. Identify goals for group
2. Identify and ask group members (if not in an established club already)
3. Orient students to the network
4. Meet weekly as a peer network
5. Encourage contact outside of the meetings

What is a peer network?

- A peer network is a social club in a classroom or other setting that provides students with a safe space to share their experiences, support one another, and work together to solve problems.

What does a peer network work look like?

- Students are working together in a classroom or other setting.
- They are talking and listening to each other.
- They are helping each other with their work.
- They are having fun and learning together.

Why create peer networks?

- They can help students who are struggling.
- They can help students who are shy.
- They can help students who are new to the school.

How can you help other people feel included?

- You can be a good listener.
- You can be a good helper.
- You can be a good friend.

What is your role as a peer partner?

- Listen to your partner's needs.
- Help your partner with their work.
- Be a good friend to your partner.

Questions for the Expert

- How do you feel about being an expert?
- How do you feel about helping others?
- How do you feel about being a peer partner?

Benefits of being in a peer network:

- You can learn from others.
- You can help others.
- You can have fun.

PEER NETWORK ACTIVITY IDEAS

In the context of:

- Clubs
- Sports
- Micro-enterprises on campus
- Service Learning

Lunch Hang-outs:

- Jenga (add questions)
- Apples to Apples
- Catch Phrase
- Uno*
- Last Word
- UnGame
- Headbanz
- Quick Cups*
- Suspend*
- Cranium
- Cooking*
- Crafts (tie dye, banners)*

WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED IN PMI?

- Student preference is KEY
- Interested in developing a connection
- Shared interests or experiences (especially for PN)
- Shared class (PS) or time (PN) with student
- Likely to stay involved for semester

MEETING WITH GROUP MEMBERS

Potential topics to cover:

- Strengths and interests
- Communication strengths, modalities, & needs
- Group goals
- Unique behaviors
- Disclosure & confidentiality



FACILITATION & MONITOR PROGRESS

Peer Supports

- Facilitate peer supports in class
- (Re)Arrange seating
- Support and/or touch base with group

Peer Networks

- Facilitate weekly network meetings
 - Conversation/activities
 - Discuss/plan out of group interactions (last/next week)
 - Remind of next meeting


BELIEVE IN THE CAPACITY OF MIDDLE & HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS



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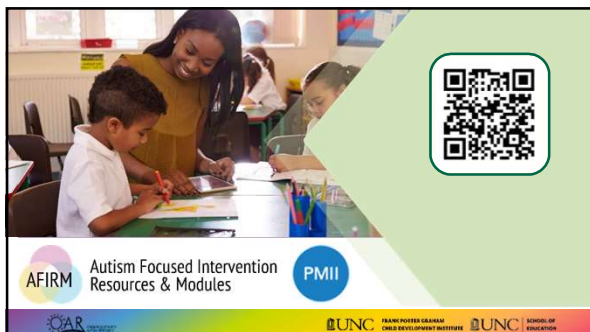


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RESOURCES



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AFIRM Autism Focused Intervention Resources & Modules PMII

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This banner features a photograph of a teacher and students at a table. A QR code is located on the right side. Logos for AFIRM, PMII, and UNC are present at the bottom.



CSESA The Center on Secondary Education for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders PEER TO PEER

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This banner features a photograph of a student in a graduation cap. A QR code is located on the right side. Logos for CSESA, PEER TO PEER, and UNC are present at the bottom.



Building Inclusive High School Communities for Autistic Students

Rentschler, L. F., Hume, K. A., & Steinbrenner, J. R. (2023). Building Inclusive High School Communities for Autistic Students. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 56(2), 98-106. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00400599221098194>

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This banner features a photograph of students in a classroom. Text on the right provides citation information for a 2023 article. Logos for UNC are present at the bottom.

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