Peer to Peer for Families

Statewide Autism Resources and Training (START)

Michigan Alliance for Families
information, support, and education



Peer to Peer for Families

December 2, 2026

START

Statewide Autism Resources & Training

The Statewide Autism Resources and Training (START) Project is housed in the Grand Valley State University (GVSU) Autism Education Center (AEC) and has been funded by the Michigan Department of Education Office of Special Education since 2001.







Who We Are

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Training Agreements

- Value the voices of others.
- Presume positive intent.
- Embrace a curious and open mindset.
- Lean into new ideas and growth.
- Ask for what you need, and offer what you can.

Peer to Peer for Families

Participant Guide

December 2, 2026

Module Description	Building a Peer to Peer program can strengthen belonging, improve outcomes for autistic students and students with IEPs, and create a more inclusive school culture. This series helps participants learn how to start, grow, and sustain a Peer to Peer program through practical tools, resources, and step-by-step guidance using the Peer to Peer Playbooks, including support for recruiting students, developing mediums of exchange, using curriculum, and building meaningful peer connections.
Agenda	• Welcome • Peer to Peer in Michigan • What is Peer to Peer • Why Peer to Peer • Belonging • Participation vs Helping • Resources
Slides	• Presentation slides
Videos and Podcasts	• What Being Autistic Taught Me About Being Human | Daniel Wendle... • The legacy of Donald Triplett, the first person diagnosed with autism • Titletown, TX, Season 1 Episode 10: Letter of Intent • Podcast: Uncover the Power of Belonging in Inclusive Education with Erik Carter ~ 1204



Today's Agenda

- Peer to Peer in Michigan
- What is Peer to Peer?
- Why Peer to Peer?
- Participation vs. Helping
- Resources

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Peer to Peer in Michigan

2025-2026 Peer to Peer Program Data

732

Buildings with Peer to Peer programs

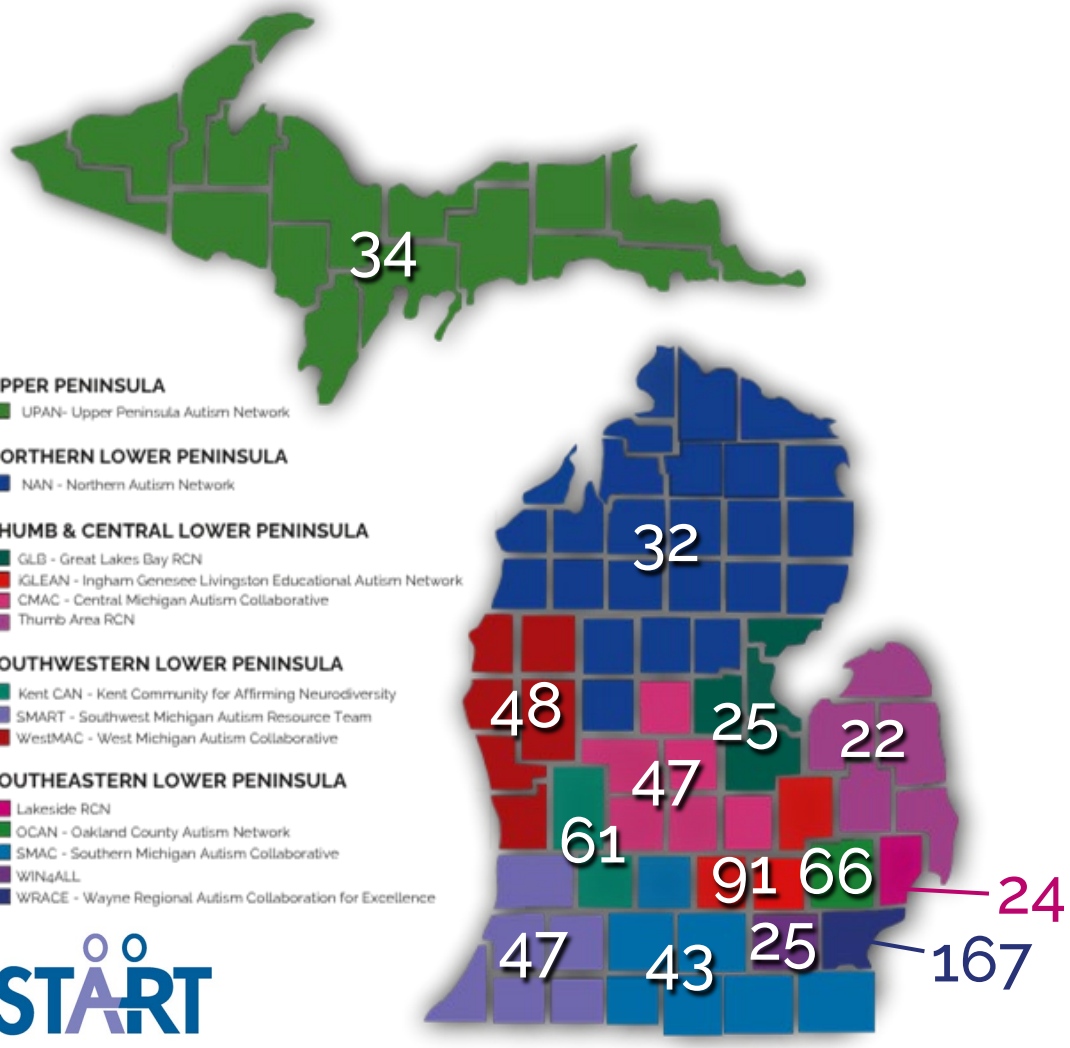
6,335

Autistic students involved in Peer to Peer programs

22,104

Peers involved in Peer to Peer

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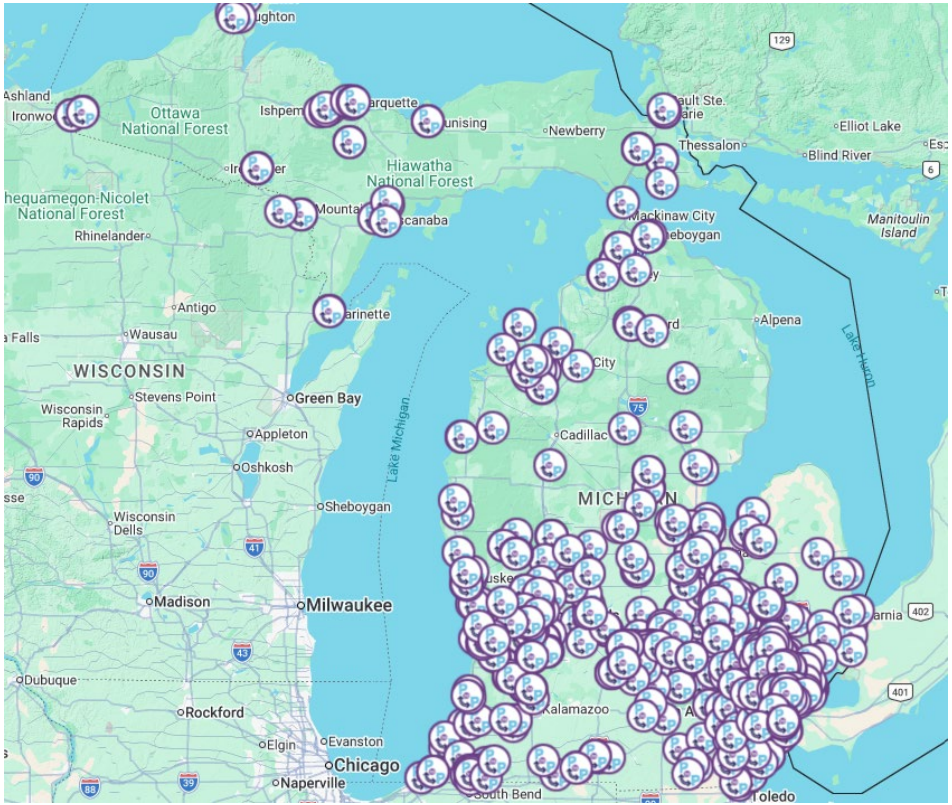


2025-2026

Peer to Peer Programs

Total: 732

2024-2025 START Peer to Peer



https://gvsu.edu/s/3y j

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What is Peer to Peer?

Definitions for the Purpose of Today

- Focus students: Students with IEPs (not just for students with autism)
- Peer Partners/LINKs: Students without IEPs

What is Peer to Peer?

- Rooted in an evidence-based practice: **strategy or approach that research has shown to be effective**
- Students with and without disabilities **interacting in typical settings** leading to authentic relationships and learning together
- Multiple peer partners are intentionally paired with students with IEPs throughout their school day and during extracurricular activities

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What is Peer to Peer?

- Provides **intentional education** and/or natural learning opportunities and experiences related to disabilities (which may include student-specific information) and inclusion

- **Focuses on shared experiences** in which peers have the opportunity to connect, and build communities where **belonging is a priority**

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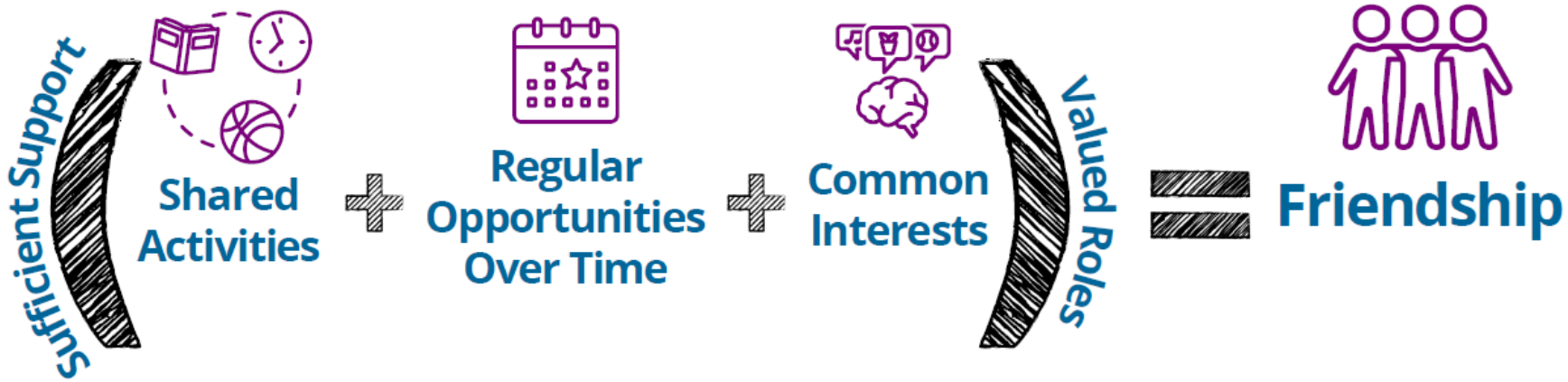


Peer to Peer provides a formal pathway for **ensuring students with and without disabilities can meet, support, enjoy, and befriend one another throughout the school day**—all while receiving needed guidance and assistance from school staff.

Moreover, the program **addresses a number of common barriers to inclusion** by creating shared activities, arranging individualized support, addressing peer attitudes, and reducing reliance on one-to-one paraprofessionals.

(Ziegler et al., 2020)

Peer Friendship Formula



Carter, E. W. (2021). Dimensions of belonging for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. In A. W. Harrist & S. M. Wilson (Series Eds.), J. L. Jones & K. L. Gallus (Vol. Eds.), *Belonging and resilience in individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities: Community and family engagement* (pp. 13-34). Springer.

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Pillars of Peer to Peer:

- First and Foremost, Create a Participation Model
- Belonging is Not Just an Outcome. It is the Priority.
- All Means ALL
- Recognize the Strengths and Embrace the Differences of All
- Focus on Developing Medium of Exchange Opportunities
- Be Intentional and Allow for Natural Connections
- Understand that Peer to Peer is an Evidence-based Practice
- Peer to Peer isn’t One More Thing, it is the Thing

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Who is Peer to Peer for?

Who is Peer to Peer For?

Focus Students:

- Autistic Students
- All ends of the spectrum
- Students with strong academic skills who need connections, allies, and friendships
- Students with IEPs

Peer Partners/LINKs:

- General Ed Students
- Students with 504s
- Students receiving Tier 2 Supports

Who is Peer to Peer For?

Me! Just teach peer partners about how I communicate!

Student 1

Communicates using AAC and spends most of the school day in a self-contained classroom. The student has limited opportunities to interact with general education peers.

Me Too!

Student 2

Spends most of the school day in a self-contained classroom. The student would benefit from more regular opportunities to build relationships with the broader school community.

Who is Peer to Peer For? (con't)

Friendship isn't a reward.

Student 3

Academically successful but experiences significant behaviors that can make social interactions and peer participation challenging. Needs intentional support to build connections.

I need friends too!

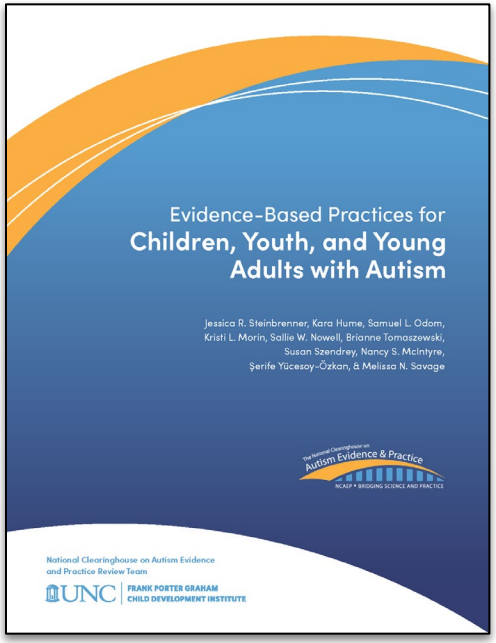
Student 4

Spends the school day in general education classes. Physically included but currently has no meaningful peer friendships or regular social connections at school.



Why Peer to Peer?

NCAEP 2020: Evidence-Based Practices Report (P-V)



- Parent Implemented Intervention
- Peer-Based Instruction and Intervention
- Prompting
- Reinforcement
- Response Interruption/Redirection
- Self-Management
- Sensory Integration
- Social Narratives
- Social Skills Training
- Task analysis
- Technology-Aided Instruction and Intervention
- Time delay
- Video Modeling
- Visual Supports

Two Ways to Address Social Skills

Traditional Approach:

- Utilize social skills curriculum to teach isolated social skills to autistic students in specific settings and then practice isolated skills in a generalized setting.

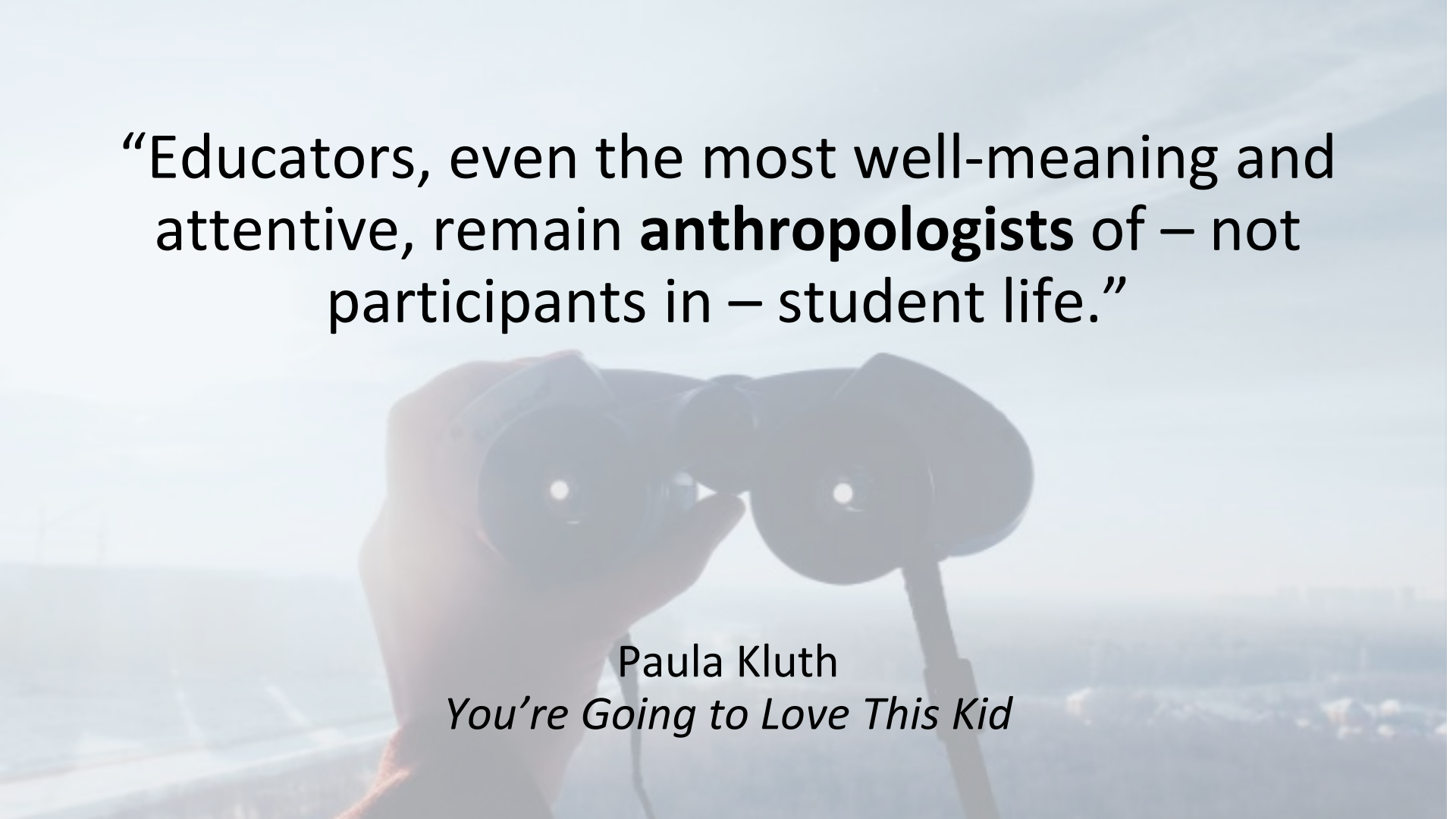
Two Ways to Address Social Skills (continued)

Peer to Peer Approach:

- **Teach peer partners** general information about autism and specific information about students with autism and other disabilities in their building.
- **Provide** experiences to learn skills and perspectives with trusted peer partners.
- **Promote** robust neurodiversity acceptance educational programs.
- **Break down** physical and invisible barriers by opening "specialized spaces" and invite peer partners into same environments.

What Happens When Peer Partners Learn about Autism and Other Disabilities?

- Demystifies the disabilities
- Supports inclusion, acceptance, and belonging
- Leads to curious mindsets
- Increases accountability with adults and classmates
- Email from student



"Educators, even the most well-meaning and attentive, remain **anthropologists** of – not participants in – student life."

Paula Kluth
You're Going to Love This Kid

Peers Matter

Why Peers?

- Students often **watch, model, and mirror** their peers.
- They may **listen more closely** to classmates than adults.
- Peer interactions feel **natural, relevant, and real**.
- Peers show what's possible: **"If they can do it, maybe I can too."**

Belonging

STATE OF MICHIGAN
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
LANSING

GRETCHEN WHITMER
GOVERNOR

MICHAEL F. RICE, Ph.D.
STATE SUPERINTENDENT

MEMORANDUM

DATE: September 2, 2025

TO: Local and Intermediate S
Public School Academy D

FROM: Michael F. Rice, Ph.D., S

SUBJECT: Belonging and Inclusion

Students begin the school year with a
It's a fresh start, a new beginning.

Over the last 7½ months, I've shared
the right to a free public education, re
status[1,2,3]; the right to an education f
discrimination on the basis of religion
orientation, or gender identity or expr
discrimination on the basis of race or
importance of language access for ou
addition, I've shared communications[7,8] about staff members' rights/responsibilities to teach about diverse literature and the full breadth of history, to establish Grow Your Own programs in districts across the state, to support all student voices, and to include students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment to the maximum extent possible.

As educators, we know it is not only important to meet the law, but also to meet the moment. It's about making sure kids—all kids—are comfortable and feel as if they belong in their own schools.

As you lead this school year, take some time to get eye level with children who may not feel the same connection to or belonging in your schools as others do, children who are regularly alone or disconnected in lunchrooms, on playgrounds, in classrooms. Do all children feel welcome in your schools? Do they all feel safe, protected, valued, and respected for who they are? If not, why not? How do you know?

There are many reasons for children to feel marginalized or stigmatized or ostracized today, inside or outside of schools. Schools and school staff can't be the answer to all of our children's challenges, but we can certainly help to mitigate these challenges to a significant degree.

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?vKeMQ2Asu8vg



Goals for Peer to Peer

No one is invisible

Bullying has no place

Joy and inclusion are the norm

Students know they matter

The Goal: Belonging and Human Connection

- **Belonging is the priority:** Students feels seen, safe, and valued
- **Joy through connection:** Students discover that other humans can bring joy, perspective, and insight
- **Learning through relationships:** By sharing space and experiences, students gain new perspectives and grow together
- **Authenticity is welcomed:** Peer to Peer fosters spaces where students can be their true selves without fear

Peer to Peer Creates the Conditions for Belonging

Belonging doesn't happen simply because students are in the same room. Peer to Peer intentionally creates the conditions for students to participate, contribute, build relationships, and experience that they matter to one another.



The Teacher's Invisible Hand

The Invisible Hand Analogy

The Powerful Role Teachers Have on Peer to Peer:

"Do adults help you with making friendships?"
They said, "No."

The students didn't perceive adult involvement.

Balance: Intentional and **Invisible Support**

Educators: impact social dynamics, scaffold peer interaction, manage grouping structures or how we bring students together, promote inclusive norms and reduce hierarchies

Farmer, McAuliffe Lines, & Hamm, 2018



The “Stuff of Friendship”

Stuff of Friendships

Friendships can't be forced-I choose you and you choose me

Friendships can be fostered-what we do as adults matter

Friendships can be hindered- don't inadvertently reinforce "helping" relationships

Elizabeth Biggs, PhD
Vanderbilt University

Ingredients for the Stuff of Friendships



Learn about strengths, interests, personality traits of their classmates (not just about disabilities)



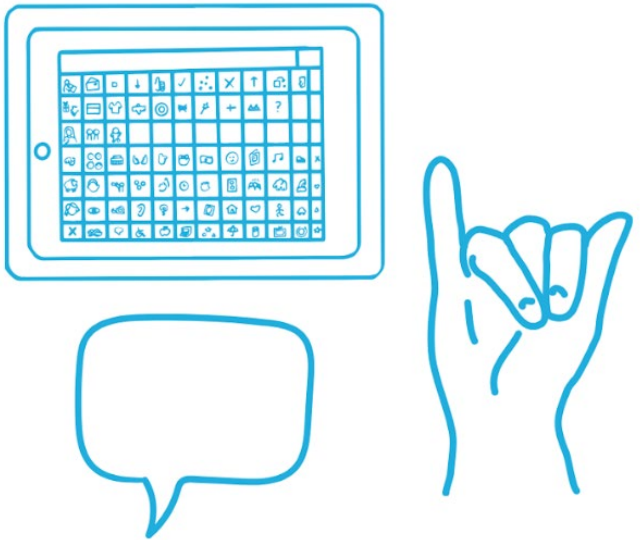
Find things they like to do together and do them often

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Ingredients for the “Stuff of Friendships” (cont.)



Have help from adults to navigate challenges



Have a way to communicate

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Ingredients for the “Stuff of Friendships” (cont.)



Have friends in common



Understand disability as an aspect of human diversity (neurodiversity)

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How do you get to a belonging?

The Participation Model



Participation vs. Helping


PARTICIPATION
VS HELPING:
WITH
not for

Participation is…

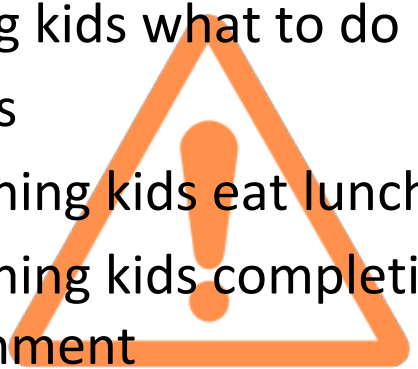
Kids:

- Being kids
- Playing/hanging out **with** kids
- Eating lunch together
- Working together on the same assignments
- Walking **with** each other in the hallways
- Learning about neurodiversity

Helping Model…

Kids:

- Being put in an adult role
- Telling kids what to do
- Tutors
- Watching kids eat lunch
- Watching kids completing an assignment
- "Taking" the student to a location in the building
- Feeling sorry for students with disabilities



Examples:

Peer Partners/LINKS are participants, kids, and they are there to act like and be kids!

Non-Examples:

They are not paid staff members, they are not there to tell the student with autism what to do or be an aide.

Helping Model Programs

A “helping” program often transfers compliance from teachers to peer partners. When that happens, we’re not building belonging, we’re just shifting who gives the directions.

Peer to Peer is not about peers telling autistic students what to do. It’s about shared experiences, mutual connection, and creating space for authentic participation. If peers become mini-teachers or behavior managers, the relationship becomes hierarchical instead of reciprocal.

Outcomes



Participation Model

- Raises expectations
- Neutralizes power
- Offers reciprocal benefits
- Prioritizes inclusion
- Fosters equitable experiences
- Focuses on strengths and assets
- Creates allies



Helping Model

- Lowers expectations
- Views students differently
- Incites power differential
- Establishes a hierarchy
- Gives peers authority
- Perpetuates ableism

START Encourages the Participant Model

No one is invisible

Bullying has no place

Joy and inclusion are the norm

Students know they matter

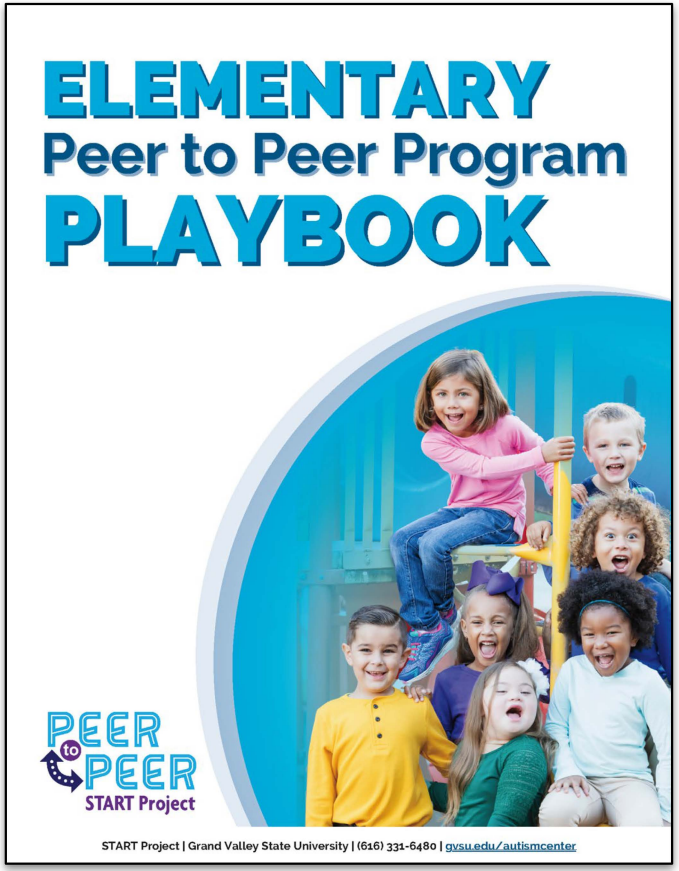


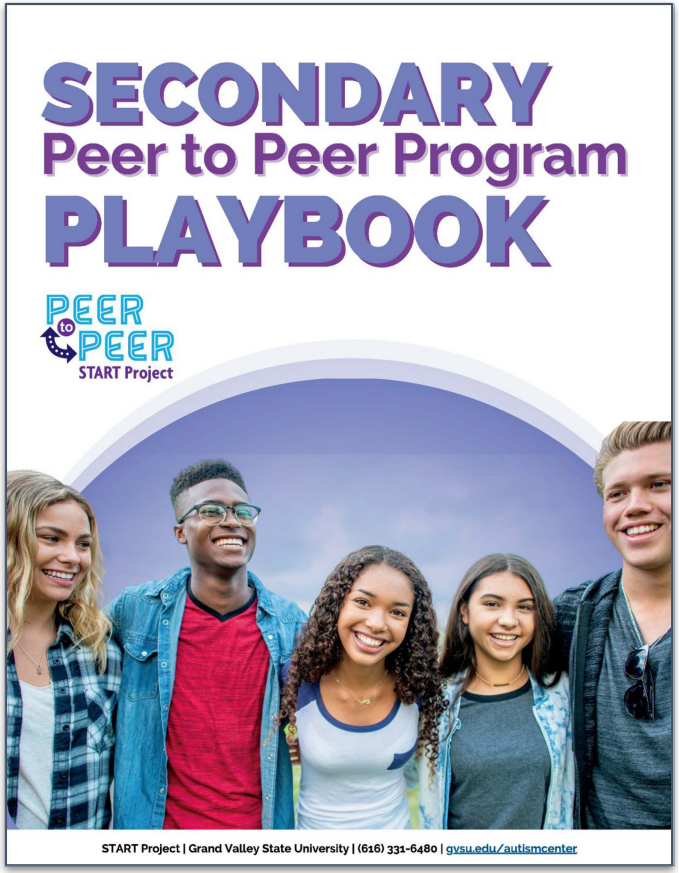
Peer to Peer Implementation and Resources



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gvsu.edu/autismcenter


ELEMENTARY
Peer to Peer Program
PLAYBOOK
PEER to PEER
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START Project | Grand Valley State University | (616) 331-6480 | gvsu.edu/autismcenter


SECONDARY
Peer to Peer Program
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ELEMENTARY Peer to Peer Curriculum

Elementary Peer to Peer Curriculum

The Peer to Peer Elementary Curriculum is an organized package of resources that Peer to Peer teams can use at the Elementary level to structure their Peer to Peer implementation. Flexibility is also built into the curriculum given the unique needs of each Peer to Peer program.

There is a Facilitator Pacing Guide for each Grade Level (K-5) which contains information about implementing the curriculum as well as each lesson. The theme of each lesson is consistent across grade levels, so if you have students from different grade levels in the same group, you can pick the grade level to implement that best suits the group as a whole.

Please note that lessons will be populated over the course of the 2024-2025 school year.

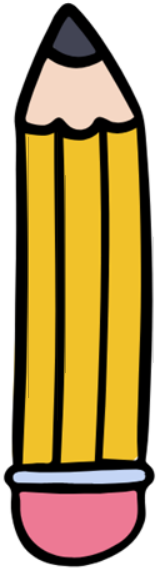
Webpage:
gvsu.edu/s/2Sq

FRIDAYS FOR ALL



Weekly Resources to Promote Inclusion in Your Classroom!

- Circle Question
- Team Building Activity
- Book or Video Resource
- Teacher Tip



Secondary Peer to Peer Curriculum

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SECONDARY
Peer to Peer
Curriculum:
REIMAGINED

Secondary Peer to Peer Curriculum

The Peer to Peer Secondary Curriculum: Reimagined is an updated version of the Peer to Peer Online Course. The goal of the Peer to Peer Secondary Curriculum: Reimagined is to provide access to quality, engaging, and age-appropriate content for Peer to Peer high school courses.

This revision offers refreshed content with an emphasis on neurodiversity and the strengths of people with autism and related disabilities. Given that the same instructional tools are not used universally across the state, central to this revision was the ability for educators to take the content and distribute it using the tools available to them.

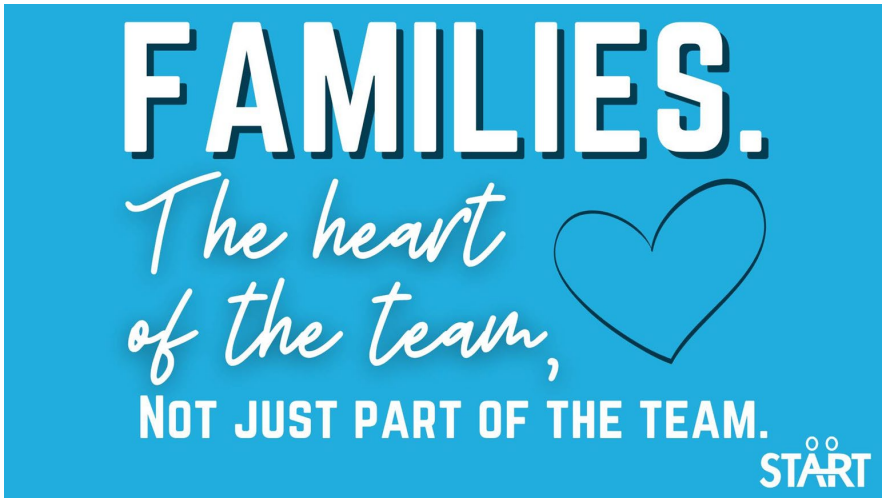


Webpage:
gvsu.edu/s/2Sq

Learning Bites

- What is Peer to Peer?
- Peer Friendship Formula

Info for Families



START PEER to PEER AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT



What is Peer to Peer?

The ultimate purpose of Peer to Peer is to connect peers with and without disabilities. The focus of these connections is on celebrating each other's successes, appreciating differences, respecting perspectives, and collaborating toward positive change. Peer to Peer is inclusive. There are no prerequisites related to communication or social skills, emotional regulation, academic performance, or past experiences. **Simply put, Peer to Peer is for everyone.**

Through Peer to Peer, school staff **harness natural opportunities** across the school day **for intentional connections** between students with disabilities and their peers. Peer education gives students knowledge and skills that demystify disabilities and increase understanding and acceptance.

Although each Peer to Peer program is different, the results are the same: **improved outcomes for students with disabilities and a more positive, accepting school culture for all.**

Note: Some schools may refer to their program as Peer to Peer, other schools may use different language. Examples include LINKS, Peers, the school's mascot, or other creative titles.

What Should Families Look for in their Child's Peer to Peer Program?

A focus on equity.

We have moved beyond a focus on "awareness" and "tolerance," to instead embracing acceptance and belonging. Peer to Peer connections must be grounded in the belief that all people have value and make meaningful contributions to the school community. Peer to Peer fights ableism by embracing neurodiversity, accepting disability as a natural part of life, promoting shared responsibility, and encouraging mutual understanding to make each other better.

A mindset that believes kids are kids.

Peers are not paraprofessionals, extra teachers, or tutors. Students with IEPs do not need more helpers or people telling them what to do in their lives. Peers are there to be role models and friends. Students need adults who understand and support the participation model. If you have any questions about what this looks like, you can review the Participation Model vs. Helping Model (gvsu.edu/s/2tG) flyer and share it with your child's school.

An emphasis on creating connections and belonging.

We all want our children to have people who understand and accept them. As with all school friendships, we don't know how long these relationships will last. Some friendships built through Peer to Peer are maintained into adulthood. Others last only a few semesters. But developing these relationships increases the child's confidence and sense of belonging, and can help them form friendships in future classrooms, on college campuses, at work, and in the community.

Dignity and mutual respect.

Students involved in Peer to Peer should be able to ask questions and learn from each other while feeling confident they are heard and supported by adults.

Info Families: Questions to Ask

Questions I can ask about Peer to Peer:

- Does my school's program focus on participation (gvsu.edu/s/2tG) and not helping?
- How does my child feel about being part of the Peer to Peer program?
- What positive impacts do you see my child having on their peers?
- What positive impacts do you seethe program having on my child?
- Is the Peer to Peer program teaching "tolerance" or "acceptance?"

Inform Families: Questions to Ask (continued)

- Are there ways I can be involved in creating connections with my child's peers outside of school?
- Are there ways I can support Peer to Peer education and activities at school?
- How do peers become involved in the Peer to Peer program?
- How is a peer paired with my child?
- Where and how often will peers connect with my child? In classes? At lunch? In social activities?

Peer to Peer FAQ

Starting a Program

- Is it easy to start a Peer to Peer Program? Where do I begin?
- What information and resources are available for me to share with my building team and administration?
- Coordinating a Peer to Peer program seems like a lot. Who helps me keep this program going?

Foundations of Peer to Peer

- Why should I implement Peer to Peer? What impact does Peer to Peer have on my students?
- How does Peer to Peer promote belonging and combat ableism?

PEER TO PEER

isn't one more thing,

IT IS THE THING

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Lead with a Peer to Peer Mindset

Always stay curious about belonging, look for opportunities to help students connect. When families share that their child needs friendships, think *Peer to Peer.* When you see a student trying to make connections but struggling, think *Peer to Peer.* When a student is sitting alone at lunch, think *Peer to Peer.* If a student is being bullied *think Peer to Peer.*

We can bring students together, we just need to be intentional about it.

Additional Peer to Peer Trainings

- Peers Matter: Fostering Social Communication and Friendship for Students Who Use or Would Benefit from AAC
  - December 8, 2026

- Peer to Peer: Start Here
  - April 14, 2027

Questions?

THANK YOU!



We are here to support you!

@MichiganAllianceForFamilies

@michiganallianceforfamilies

/MichiganAlliance



For more information visit
www.michiganallianceforfamilies.org

Call 800-552-4821
En Español 313-217-1060
248-963-0607 للغه العربيه
info@michiganallianceforfamilies.org

Michigan Alliance for Families
information, support, and education

Michigan Alliance for Families

In collaboration with The Arc Michigan

Michigan Alliance for Families is an IDEA Grant Funded Initiative of the Michigan Department of Education, Office of Special Education (MDE-OSE); the Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential (MiLEAP); and Michigan's Federal Parent-Training and Information Center (PTIC) funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs(OSEP).

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MICHIGAN Department of Education

MiLEAP Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential

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