

Peer Support or System Gap?

A reflection for recognising when peer support is complementing inclusion — and when it is compensating for missing support.

Peer support can be a valuable part of school life. Children naturally help one another, and those moments of kindness and connection should not automatically be discouraged.

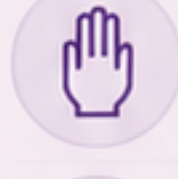
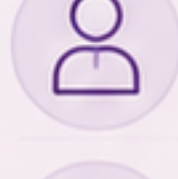
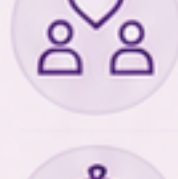
But when a student's participation depends on another child being available, peer support may be filling a gap that belongs to the support system.



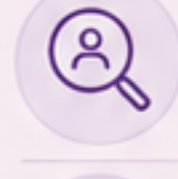
Kindness should support inclusion — not substitute for missing support.

LOOK AT WHAT PEER SUPPORT IS DOING

PEER SUPPORT IS ADDING TO INCLUSION WHEN...

-  the student can still participate if the peer is absent
-  help is freely offered rather than expected
-  the peer can say no without consequences
-  essential support remains an adult/system responsibility
-  friendships are free to change
-  the student knows where reliable support will come from

PEER SUPPORT MAY BE FILLING A SYSTEM GAP WHEN...

-  access changes depending on which peers are present
-  the same child is regularly expected to help
-  a student has to find someone willing to assist
-  peers are performing tasks because formal support is unavailable
-  friendship and support responsibilities are becoming difficult to separate
-  the arrangement would fall apart if the peer stopped helping



If the peer wasn't here tomorrow, what would happen?

Peer support should add to inclusion, not hold it together.

The Peer Support Check



Reliable inclusion should not depend on luck, popularity, or one helpful peer.

Before continuing with a peer-support arrangement, pause long enough to consider what support is being provided, who is responsible for it, and what happens if the arrangement changes.

1 ASK ABOUT THE SUPPORT

- What does the student actually need help with?
- Who is responsible for providing that support?
- Is a peer providing something essential or something additional?
- How often is peer assistance needed?
- Is appropriate adult support available when required?

2 ASK ABOUT RELIABILITY

- What happens if the peer is absent?
- What happens when classes or friendship groups change?
- Does the student know who else they can approach?
- Does access depend on knowing the "right" person?

3 ASK ABOUT THE PEER

- Did they choose this role?
- Can they stop helping without feeling guilty?
- Is helping interfering with their own learning or friendships?
- Have adults begun assuming they will always help?

4 ASK ABOUT THE STUDENT RECEIVING SUPPORT

- Do they feel comfortable with the arrangement?
- Do they feel responsible for keeping the peer happy?
- Are they reluctant to ask because they don't want to be a burden?
- Do they have meaningful choice over who helps them?



REFLECTION

Are children participating within a supported system — or are children making an under-supported system function?

Support should create access the child can rely on, not access that depends on another child carrying the gap.

What Needs to Change?

Protect what is natural. Replace what should never have been left to peers.

Once a peer-support arrangement is examined, the next step is deciding what should stay, what needs to change, and what must become a formal responsibility.



The goal is not less kindness.
The goal is more reliable support.



KEEP

What is working naturally and should remain?



genuine friendship



spontaneous kindness



peer connection



mutually chosen help



CHANGE

What has become too dependent on peers?



regular physical assistance



classroom access



communication support



carrying essential equipment



navigating inaccessible environments



PROVIDE

What needs to become an adult, environmental or formal support responsibility?

ONE CHANGE WE CAN MAKE



Instead of relying on a peer to _____
we can provide _____.

Children should be free to help each other.
They should not have to compensate for what the system has failed to provide.

*If inclusion stops working when a helpful peer is absent,
look at the system—not the child.*