

Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) for Reading in the EBD Classroom

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How much of your time is spent redirecting your students from talking, getting out of their seats, distracting their peers, and generally being off task when all you really want them to do is read? Students with emotional or behavioral disorders (EBD) often present behavioral issues during academic activities. These students typically exhibit (a) an inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors; (b) an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers; (c) inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances; (d) a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; and (e) a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems (Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004, 34 CFR 300.8(c)(4)). Reading is one academically challenging activity during which students with EBD often act out to avoid teacher demands.

Students with EBD have variable results in reading achievement (Wehby, Falk, Barton-Arwood, Lane, & Colley, 2003) stemming from many different behavioral and learning aspects, including poor reading achievement or unpredictable motivation (Wehby et al.). However, when students have daily opportunities to be successful in reading and can monitor their progress, they are more likely to experience positive academic and social results (Scott & Shearer-Lingo, 2002).

Our hypothetical case study based on actual student observations

demonstrates how special and general education teachers can use Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS; Fuchs, Fuchs, Mathes, & Martinez, 2002) during reading instruction to improve the on-task behavior of students with EBD and improve reading comprehension. PALS pairs

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students with similar abilities (one slightly more advanced than the other) and teaches them to work together to improve academic skills (Maheady & Harper, 1991). Students with EBD have opportunities to improve both peer relations and academic skills through participating in PALS.

PALS During Reading

The PALS approach uses student dyads, one student who functions higher in reading and a student functioning lower in reading. An easy way to accomplish this is to rank all the students in the class according to reading ability, then split the class in half with the higher reading ability students on one list and the lower reading ability students on another list. Pair the first student from the higher reading ability list with the first student on the lower reading ability list; continue with the second student paired with the second student and so on until all students are in dyads.

Once students are placed in their dyads, they will need to practice giving corrective feedback and encouragement when appropriate to one another. Because students sometimes need direction as to how to give constructive feedback, encouragement, and praise, each student should receive cue cards for just these types of comments (see Figures 1 and 2). These cue cards help students during PALS sessions and should be practiced prior to the first session so they know exactly what to do. Teachers also need to remember to provide encouragement and praise to students who use both cue cards correctly.

When the students are in their respective dyads, the more proficient reader starts the session as the tutor and reads a preselected passage aloud. The reading selection is based on the reading level of the lower performing reader. By reading aloud first, the higher performing reader, provides a model for the second reader, which promotes a more successful reading.

Figure 1 CUE CARD FOR CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK

CUE CARD	
Word-Reading Error	
SAY	
"Stop. You missed that word. Can you figure it out?"	
Count to 5.	
If your partner does not answer or answers incorrectly,	
SAY	
"That word is _____. What word?"	
Your partner says the word.	
SAY	
"Good. Read the sentence again."	
<i>Mark one point on your score card if you followed the correction procedure.</i>	
<i>Mark one point on your score card if your partner corrected the sentence.</i>	

The tutor corrects any mistakes the tutee makes in answering the comprehension question and also praises the tutee when correct responses are given.

If the teacher wants the dyads to compete with one another, she can implement a point system where the dyads can earn a predetermined number of points, based on the reading selected, during a PALS session.

PALS Steps for Success

One of the keys to successfully using PALS with students with EBD is explicitly teaching and describing the steps of the PALS process. First, prepare in advance the reading and instructional materials needed for student use. Then, introduce your students to the steps to success in using PALS during reading lessons:

1. Explain to the students that PALS will help them read better and remember more information from their reading. It is important to stress that practice and being "on task" is crucial to helping their partner.
2. Discuss how working together helps both students to be successful; remind them of the importance of teamwork, particularly if you plan to incorporate the team competition/point system element. Explain that each team will have a "tutor" and a "tutee" (make sure the more proficient student is chosen as the tutor first), and that the roles alternate with each reading so each will have a chance to be tutor and tutee.
3. Teach the students the routine for preparing their work areas for PALS: Students can clear their work areas, gather PALS materials, get into their assigned dyads, and arrange the PALS materials so each student has access.

Figure 2 PRAISE CUE CARD

CUE CARD	
Ways to Say "Very Good"	
I knew you could do it.	You've just about mastered it.
Congratulations!	That's better than ever.
Not bad.	Much better!
Now you have it!	You must have been practicing.
You are learning fast.	Keep it up!
Good for you!	You did a lot of work today.
Couldn't have done it better myself.	I like that.
You really make my job fun.	Way to go!
You did it that time!	Now you have the hang of it.
You haven't missed a thing!	Good thinking.
WOW!	You are really learning a lot.
That's the way!	Good going.
TERRIFIC!	Good for you!
You figured that out fast.	I think you've got it now.
You remembered!	Good job, (person's name).

4. Teach the students what behaviors are expected of the tutor and the tutee. Model and practice these behaviors with your students. Make sure the students model and practice the acceptable behaviors for giving and accepting corrective feedback. After modeling and practicing the acceptable behaviors, teach students how to give encouragement and praise for trying a difficult task and accomplishing the task.
5. Discuss constructive and nonconstructive pair behavior with your students. Explain that constructive pair behavior looks like two students who are on task and giving each other encouragement and praise, whereas nonconstructive pair behavior looks like students who are playing or are off task, or students who are arguing and calling each other names. Develop a plan with the students through a behavioral contract or a list of things to accomplish during the activity. Role play and practice with the students constructive pair behaviors.
6. Reinforce, praise, and acknowledge their hard work and correct behavior.

A PALS Scenario

The Student

Emmett is a 12-year-old sixth-grader attending a collaborative class for students with EBD and their general education peers. A "collaborative" classroom comprises both special education students and general education students taught by two teachers: one special education teacher and one general education teacher. He has a full-scale IQ of 90 (verbal = 85 and performance = 95) according to the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-III. According to Emmett's teachers he performs below grade level in reading, is inattentive and off task during class, and can be noncompliant when asked to read aloud.

Emmett performs on the grade equivalent of third grade (3.2) on the broad reading subtest of the Woodcock Johnson Reading Mastery Test-Revised (Woodcock, 1998). Additionally, Emmett is rated in the clinical range for the areas of hyperactivity, impulsivity, and conduct problems on the Behavior Assessment System for Children (BASC; Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2002). Emmett has problems remaining on

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task during most academic activities and is often isolated by his peers because his disruptive behavior leads to class consequences.

Emmett's behavior is most difficult to manage during reading class and independent work times. He typically (a) talks to peers sitting next to him, (b) takes materials from peers without permission, (c) makes fun of others when they read by making oral comments, (d) walks away from his assigned area when he makes an error, (e) yells at the teacher when she corrects his misbehavior, (f) uses profanity when he mispronounces a word when reading aloud, and (g) slams his book on the desk when

he cannot answer a comprehension question.

Emmett's teacher also reports that because he engages in most of these behaviors during reading class he has failed to make any progress on his reading objectives as outlined in his individualized education program (IEP). His teacher feels that if Emmett's behavior does not improve he will continue to fall academically behind his peers and not perform well on the state assessments. She has tried many interventions, without success, to correct Emmett's behavior—including moving Emmett's work area away from his peer group; taking away privileges (listening to CDs, computer time); working with Emmett one-on-one during advisement time; calling his parents; and taking points away from his classmates in an effort to get them to help control his behavior. Despite his teacher's best efforts, Emmett's behavior has escalated, especially during reading time, to the point where he is regularly sent to the office for inappropriate behavior.

In sum, Emmett has not been able to make adequate progress on his reading objectives and needs to improve his on-task behavior. Thus far, the disciplinary actions his teacher has used have not been effective in reducing his inappropriate behavior. His teacher recognizes she needs to try an approach that focuses on positive peer interactions and academic success, and decides to use PALS to address both Emmett's reading failure and his inappropriate behavior.

Benefits of Using PALS With Students With EBD

PALS has been widely researched with students with learning disabilities (LD). These findings can be applied to students with EBD who characteristically display some similar learning challenges as students with LD (Fulk & King, 2001). Locke and Fuchs (1995) and Mastropieri et al., (2001), using PALS, improved the reading comprehension and on-task

Figure 3 COMPREHENSION CUE CARD

CUE CARD
Comprehension

SAY

“What happened first?”

Wait for answer. If correct, SAY

“What happened second?”

If the answer is incorrect, SAY

“That’s not quite right, _____ happened first. What happened first?”

Wait for answer. Give praise for correct answer and encouragement to try the next question.

Repeat as necessary.

Continue until your partner has told you everything that happened in that paragraph.

Switch after each paragraph so both people get a chance to answer questions.

Score one point for each correctly answered question.

the reading passage. When Emmett answers correctly, the tutor praises him.

Emmett’s teacher decides to implement a point system for team competition, so the dyads receive and maintain point cards (see Figure 4). When Emmett and his partner are reading a paragraph with eight sentences, Emmett potentially can earn eight points (one for each sentence) and his tutor can earn one point for each time she correctly follows the correction procedure. Emmett also earns one point for each comprehension question he answers correctly, and his tutor one point for each appropriate correction of a mistake in the comprehension exercise. His teacher decides to also offer a point for each time Emmett appropriately responds to feedback. Emmett’s teacher reminds all the students to cooperate when competing, to ensure positive engagement.

behavior of students who exhibited high rates of off-task behavior during reading activities.

Emmett’s inappropriate behavior during reading activities might be due to his inconsistent performance in reading. Wehby et al. (2003) found that erratic performance and motivation contributed to poor performance in reading skills. Because of Emmett’s inappropriate behavior he often does not receive positive feedback. Through

PALS, Emmett will be able to receive encouragement and praise, which Scott and Shearer-Lingo (2002) found to increase reading performance for students like Emmett.

Implementing PALS

To help ensure Emmett and his peers experience success during PALS, they first learn and practice specific skills before the first PALS session. Because Emmett has difficulty with reading, his teacher designates him as the tutee, to read second when paired with a peer. This will provide a model for him and increase his chances for success when he is reading aloud. When Emmett makes a mistake, his partner uses the corrective feedback cue card (see Figure 1) to correct the error. The praise cue card (Figure 2) also gives the tutor many ways to tell Emmett that he is doing a good job. Once Emmett has finished reading a paragraph, his tutor asks comprehension questions based on the comprehension cue card (see Figure 3). The tutor corrects any mistakes Emmett makes and gives him some encouragement. The tutor then asks Emmett what happened second in

Emmett’s Behavior Today

After using PALS during reading, Emmett’s teacher noticed that much of his behavior improved. Previously, Emmett often talked at inappropriate times with his neighbors; PALS allowed him to appropriately engage in talking with peers. Once he mastered giving and receiving feedback, Emmett’s history of attempts to receive attention inappropriately was exchanged for appropriate attention seeking.

Academically, Emmett has made some gains in reading and he appears motivated to try new tasks. Because he is becoming more appropriate in interacting with his peers, his teacher has been able to focus on this positive behavior and therefore less on his inappropriate behavior. Now, when she redirects Emmett’s off-task behavior, he accepts the redirection more readily. With the positive peer attention he has received for his attempts at new and sometimes difficult academic tasks, he is much less likely to engage in profanity and slamming his books

Figure 4 POINT SCORE CARD

Team Name: _____

Date: _____ **Points:** _____

when he does not know the answers. He has learned to properly ask for help and has improved his interactions with peers in the process.

Final Thoughts

PALS has been shown to be successful with diverse student populations (Locke & Fuchs, 1995; Mastropieri et al., 2001). It is an easy and cost- and time-efficient method that can be effective in both the collaborative classrooms we describe and self-contained classrooms. PALS and the component skills comprising the tutor/tutee interaction are invaluable in helping students with EBD acquire the life skills they need to be successful.

Using PALS provides Emmett with opportunities to be successful in reading passages and remembering what he has read. With some teacher support and explicit teaching of the steps in the PALS strategy, Emmett's off-task behavior is reduced during the PALS time. In addition, he receives a structured opportunity to improve his relationships with his peers and teacher.

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