

Learning is Social: Designing Partner Activities to Boost Academic Outcomes and Social Emotional Learning

**Learning is Social:
Designing Partner Activities to Boost
Academic Outcomes and SEL**
Lessons from Tools of the Mind



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Partner Activities

We have found that by modifying regular classroom activities to become **Partner Activities** we can create a **Community of Learners** that can support both mental health and academic achievement




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Why aren't Partner Activities common in Kindergarten classrooms?

- The belief that whole class instruction is the most efficient way to teach, especially when you have to cover a lot of content
- Partner activities are harder to manage (especially with younger students who tend to do things for their partners)
- Misconceptions exist about how Partner Activities work: Children copy instead of using their own minds; It's "cheating"; Children just goof off and talk
- It turns into "tutoring" because the child with fewer skills cannot help the child with more skills.
- It exacerbates the use of ability grouping because you can't pair children with different abilities to help each other

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Partner Activities Work

Preschool Program Improves Cognitive Control

Closing the Achievement Gap through Modification of Neurocognitive and Neuroendocrine Function: Results from a Cluster Randomized Controlled Trial of an Innovative Approach to the Education of Children in Kindergarten

Cherry Hill, C. Colvin River

Published: November 12, 2014 • <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0170285>

Article	Abstract	Metrics	Comments	Media Coverage
Abstract	Abstract			

Randomized control trial of Tools of the Mind: Marked benefits to kindergarten children and their teachers

Allen O'Connell, Charles Peter Gershon, Andrea Lyles, David Abbott


Published: September 17, 2014 • <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0120947>

Abstract:
The kindergarten program, Tools of the Mind (ToM), has been shown to improve executive functions (as assessed by laboratory measures) and academic performance. The objective here was to see if ToM can improve executive functions in the real world in the classroom, academic outcomes and parental involvement, reduce bullying and peer rejection, and increase teachers and students' social skills during the relationship. This trial randomized children of 4-5 years old (N=1,000) to 21 kindergarten classrooms (mean age 5.2 years at entry; 51% females) in 16 public schools. Standardized measures of teachers and students in both groups being closely related. Teachers in both groups reported the same number of missing days and leave days for one month. Outcome measures were pre and post standardized academic skill assessments and teacher online survey responses. This study replicated the ToM trial and showed that the benefits of ToM were maintained in the real world. The results of the school districts had been better, self-control and attention-regulation in the real world (e.g., time on task without distraction) increase together (school and classroom using collaborative or evidence-based) and increase the 50% decrease and teacher experience in the real world. The results of the study showed that the benefits of ToM were maintained in the real world. This trial only better than the control group but also better than ToM teachers experienced the real world ToM. This children in a kindergarten curriculum that emphasized play, improving self-regulation, working together and helping one another, and hands-on learning performed better academically, showed less bullying and peer rejection and more kindness and helping behavior than children in a control classroom. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0120947>

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Tools of the Mind

- Research-based Pre-K and K curriculum and professional development program
- Many years of experience working with teachers/children from diverse backgrounds
- Have multiple sources of evidence (from RCTs to district data) proving that our approach works



PLOS ONE

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Citation: O'Connell A, Lyles A, Gershon C, Abbott D, et al. (2014) Randomized control trial of Tools of the Mind: Marked benefits to kindergarten children and their teachers. *PLOS ONE* 9(9): e120947. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0120947



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What is Tools of the Mind?

A theory of teaching and learning

Tools of the Mind:

- Creates a Community of Learners based on Partner Activities
- Develops Executive Functions and academic skills
- Scaffolds based on individual child development
- Integrates Make-Believe Play and Playful Learning as leading activities
- Teaches children how to learn





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Partner Activities

A way to support academic learning by embedding peer interactions that increase motivation, provide practice in key concepts/skills and support social-emotional development



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Partner Activities

- Support learning by increasing the quality of child practice and reinforcing good learning habits
- Enhance the development social skills and broaden classroom friendships
- Build a feeling of community and caring in the classroom over time

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What are Partner Activities?

- Children are paired for an entire activity or for a part of an activity
- Short embedded routines and rules are used to ensure that children help each other but do their own learning
- Designed to support good learning habits
- Designed so children practice and learn key content and skills with as few errors as possible
- Designed so children don't need adult intervention or prompting to do the activity
- Foster feelings of emotional support and friendship

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Anatomy of the Study Buddy Activity

- Partners interact as a part of the activity
- Partners reinforce the strategies or concepts that the pair is trying to learn
- Partners reinforce good learning habits
 - Getting started right away
 - Reflecting on learning
 - Checking your work--Did I practice the right thing?
- Strategies were identified by the teacher as skills all children should work on or that a particular child has agreed is something he should work on. (This is not one child "grading" or correcting everything that is wrong with the partner's work)

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Anatomy of a Study Buddy Activity

- Children have rehearsed how to provide the feedback to each other
- Partners have been paired who are at different levels as well as children at the same level. The goal is working with everyone else in the classroom
- Interactions with a positive exchange: "Good job" or "You did it!"
- Teachers monitor how the pairing is going during a Learning Conference giving feedback on giving support and taking support. Children work on being a "Good Study Buddy"

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Research

Partner Activities

- Enhance Academic Skills
- Provide Practice in Good Learning Habits
- Support Social Skill Development
- Support Friendship Development
- Create a Community of Learners


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 **Enhance Academic Skills**

- Practice of content and important skills is more engaging with a partner
- Partner feedback can be immediate and can reduce errors
- **“Other-regulation”** can deepen knowledge and self-regulation



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 **Vygotskian Approach**

- **“Other-regulation”** leads to self-regulation”




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 **Provide Practice in Good Learning Habits**

- Promote executive functions development by increasing inhibitory control, working memory and cognitive flexibility
- Encourage meta-cognition (thinking about thinking)
- Provide social-emotional support for persistence. It's motivating to work with a partner!
- Keep children from getting stuck and becoming inattentive
- Remind children to check and finish work




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 **Support Social Skill Development**

- Provide a script for how to engage in social-initiations and reciprocal exchanges with peers
- Provide daily practice in helping others
- Supports empathy development




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 **Support Friendship Development**

- Use the fact that friendships form through **proximity and interaction**—not just affinity
- Children are likely to chose as friends, children they have had **positive interactions** with
- Working with every other child reduces clique formation in the classroom (no bullies, no victims)




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 **Create a Community of Learners**


- Sets up a structure where children help each other as part of the way the classroom functions.
- Tolerance for making mistakes is built into the classroom rules and interactions



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Creating Partner Activities in Your Classroom

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Characteristics of Activities that make good Partner Activities

- What is the key thing(s) you want the children to practice or learn in the activity?
- Can you state what the buddy does so it can help the partner make fewer mistakes or help the partner with a barrier that keeps him/her from doing the activity?
- Are there specific strategies you can give children so they can help each other if they get stuck?
- How will you know the buddy has checked their partner?

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Blank writing lines for a worksheet.

Kindergarten Writing Prompts




1. My Favorite season is ...
2. My Favorite color is ...
3. My Favorite animal is ... because ...
4. My Food is ...
5. My mom always helps me ...
6. I like ... because ...
7. I want to go to ...
8. I love summer because ...
9. My Favorite snack is ...
10. I love school because ...
11. If I was an animal, I would be a ...
12. My Favorite toy is ...

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