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# Cooperative Learning...

## *a proactive intervention for the classroom*

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*This Intervention Tip Sheet has been developed to assist teachers and parents in providing the best possible educational opportunities to students with emotional and behavioral disorders. This Tip Sheet was published by the Institute on Community Integration, College of Education, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis and was authored by Kareen Smith of the Institute.*

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### **Introduction**

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Cooperative learning involves having students work as teams. It is beneficial to students in several ways: it creates peer pressure and support for mastering skills, it develops interpersonal and small group skills, it encourages individual accountability, and it creates an environment in which to learn and practice social skills. The ability to work cooperatively is a vital skill that is often neglected in the education process. This sheet outlines the core components of cooperative learning and ideas for how to introduce cooperative learning activities into your classroom.

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### **Why is cooperative learning important?**

Most of the learning that children do in school is very passive; they are expected to sit back, listen, absorb, and recall. Cooperative learning actively engages the student in his or her learning process by creating an opportunity for teaching and learning to occur between peers. It results in positive peer pressure on all individuals to achieve group goals. It also supports each individual to ensure that those of varying ability can achieve these goals.

In an education system that typically promotes individualism and independence, the experience of cooperative learning introduces the understanding that one needs to rely on and have connections with others to succeed. This sense of interdependence is vital to successful and satisfying functioning in the adult world.

Finally, one of the most valuable uses of cooperative learning is to teach social and interpersonal skills. Particularly in working with students with behavior problems, cooperative learning teams provide a safe, intimate atmosphere where social skills are modeled by other group members. It is a place where students can practice new skills.

### **What skills are necessary for cooperative learning to be a success?**

In order for cooperative learning to be a success, a sense of positive interdependence must be developed. This refers to a sense that each team member's contribution is valuable and necessary in order to achieve goals. Johnson and Johnson (1991) outline the following skills that must be taught and practiced in cooperative learning teams.

**Goal setting:** The first step to creating an atmosphere of positive interdependence is setting a mutual goal which is reachable only if all members of the team participate. The goal should be structured so that every team member is responsible for learning the material and ensuring that every other group member learns the material.

**Leadership skills:** There are three general leadership skills that are necessary for cooperative learning. **Giving directions** encompasses being able to review the instructions, call attention to time limits, and offer ideas on how to most effectively proceed with the task. **Summarizing** involves the ability to review aloud what has just been read or discussed, referring to notes or the original material as little as possible. **Generating answers** refers to coming up with as many possible answers from which the team can choose the best answer.

**Cooperative and interpersonal skills:** Some students may already be, to differing degrees, proficient in some of these skills. It is through monitoring and observing that you will see which skills students lack and need to

develop. There are four levels of these skills. **Forming skills** involves being able to quietly come together as a group, to stay with the group, to quickly attend to the task, use quiet voices, and take turns. **Functioning skills** are what help the group develop and maintain an effective working relationship. These include sharing ideas and opinions, asking each other and the teacher for facts and reasoning, giving direction to stay on task, encouraging participation of other group members, expressing support and acceptance of other group members' ideas and contributions, offering to explain one's ideas, and paraphrasing one's own and others' ideas. **Formulating skills** are cognitive skills which stimulate and develop the use of higher quality reasoning skills. These are: the ability to summarize ideas and material aloud, seeking accuracy of these summaries, seeking elaboration by relating material to what is already known, developing ways of remembering information (mnemonic devices, for example), checking other group members' understanding by asking for verbalization of their reasoning processes, and asking others to plan out loud. **Synthesizing** involves skills necessary to dispute and reconceptualize material and conclusions. These skills are necessary in thinking more divergently about an issue and arguing constructively about differences. Students need to learn to: criticize ideas while expressing respect for the person with the idea, differentiate between group members' ideas and reasoning, ask for rationalization of ideas, extend other members' ideas by adding one's own information, integrate differing ideas into a single position, generate more than one possible answer, and check the group's work against the original instructions and timelines.

### ***How do students learn cooperative skills?***

Cooperative skills are not generally learned in school. From the time students enter kindergarten, independence and competition, rather than interdependence and cooperation, are stressed. Therefore, it cannot be expected that students are immediately successful in their cooperative learning teams. They must first be taught the necessary skills.

These are taught first through procedural explanation. Each skill, its purpose and importance are explained. Then, the skill is modeled. It is beneficial to demonstrate the skill both effectively and ineffectively and to discuss with students what was different about each example and why one was preferable. Next, provide the opportunity to practice and role-play. Given different hypothetical situations, students' role-playing sessions should be reviewed by both teacher and other students, and feedback should be given. Finally, students should be given the chance to reflect on the feedback, ask questions, and, if necessary, practice more.

### ***How can I incorporate cooperative learning into my lessons?***

These are activities recommended by Johnson and Johnson (1991) which are quick and easy ways to begin implementing cooperative learning:

**Turn to neighbor:** For three to five minutes, have students turn to their neighbor and explain an idea of the lesson to each other, state three important points of the lesson, come up with a question about the topic, or whatever else might fit into the lesson.

**Jigsaw:** Each team member reads or studies a part of the lesson and is then responsible for teaching what he or she has learned to the other members.

**Pre- and post-group activities:** Before new lessons, have students work in their teams to brainstorm and write down what they already know of the topic and predict what they will learn. After the lesson, have them get together again to paraphrase and summarize what they have learned and what more they would like to learn.

**Homework checkers:** Have students work in their teams to compare homework and discuss differing answers, correct answers, and include why they have changed their answers. The team can then turn in all the papers, with one being the final product.

**Book report pairs:** Have students work in pairs and interview each other on the book or story he or she has read. Each person then reports on what the other has read in oral or written form.

**Writing response teams:** Students read and review each others' papers, making written comments on what they like, suggestions they have, making grammar and punctuation corrections, and discussing it with the author.

### ***How should cooperative teams be formed?***

Start with small groups of two or three students. Large groups require more interactions and, if students do not already possess cooperative learning skills, successful team outcomes will be unlikely.

Form the groups yourself. Make sure that teams are diverse in ability, gender, and ethnicity. You do not want to have one group of the two highest achievers in the class and another of the two lowest. There is disagreement in the literature about whether friends should be paired together. Many authors believe that letting two close friends comprise a team will lead to lots of off-task behavior. However, there is research which shows that friends are often more productive and creative and engage in higher levels of cognitive functioning because they do not have to spend time getting to know each other and are more willing to challenge each other's ideas. It may, therefore, be more beneficial to have friends work together on short-term products and to group students together who do not know each other as well for longer-term projects.

Make your expectations of group behavior very clear. Observe teams as they work, ask questions about what they are doing, and prompt them when they are having trouble getting started. Sit down with them while they work and give feedback about their process.

Finally, integrate cooperative learning into your curriculum. Have students review for tests together, work on assignments together, and check each other's work for accuracy and completeness. The more discussion and interaction there is between students, the more active participation there will be and the more they will learn.

### ***How can I approach problem behavior within cooperative teams?***

Dishon and O'Leary (1984) describe and discuss how to handle the four most common behavioral problems which occur during cooperative learning (especially when students are first learning how to work as a team). These are as follows:

1. **Passive uninvolvement:** Passive uninvolvement is expressed by students turning away from their group, not paying attention to the group, saying little or nothing, not bringing materials and work to the group, etc. When these behaviors occur, you may try to:
  - Jigsaw tasks so that each team member has needed information. Then, if the uninvolved team member does not voluntarily contribute information, the other members will actively involve the student.
  - Assign the uninvolved member a role which is crucial to the group's success and is implicitly involved, such as reader or secretary.
  - Reward teams for their average performance. This will motivate teams to actively involve an uninvolved member.
2. **Active noninvolvement:** Active noninvolvement is occurring when a student is doing and talking about everything but the group task. He or she may be leaving the group and walking around, purposely giving wrong answers, and refusing to do group work or to work with specific team members. In such cases, you may offer some sort of positive reinforcement that is especially preferred by the uninvolved student or the group which is contingent upon group success.
3. **Independence:** When you see a student working alone and independently of the team, you can:
  - Limit the resources of the group, for example, provide only one pencil and piece of paper or one newspaper. In this way, the student will be forced to work with the group.
  - Jigsaw tasks so that each team member has needed information. The student must then work with group members in order to complete the task.
4. **Taking charge:** When a student "takes charge," you will observe him or her refusing to let other group members do work, ordering other team members around, doing all the work, bullying other members, or making team decisions without the input of other members. In such cases, you can:

- Jigsaw materials and resources so that the student cannot complete the task without input from other members.
- Assign group roles so that other group members have more powerful roles such as reader, secretary, summarizer, etc.
- Reward the group on the basis of the lowest group score(s). This will pressure the student to help and cooperate with others so that they learn the material.

### ***How should I assign grades for teamwork?***

Johnson and Johnson (1991) give the following suggestions for assigning grades to cooperative learning tasks:

1. **Individual score plus bonus points based on all members reaching criterion:** After studying or working together, each student completes his or her own work. He or she then receives a grade plus bonus points if all group members have achieved a preset criterion of success.
2. **Individual score plus bonus points based on lowest score:** After studying or working together, each student completes his or her own work. Members then receive a grade plus bonus points on the basis of the lowest individual score in their team.
3. **Individual score plus group average:** After studying or working together, each student completes his or her own work. He or she is awarded a grade consisting of his or her individual score plus the score which is the average score of the group.
4. **Individual score plus bonus based on improvement scores:** After studying or working together, each student completes his or her own work. Each student is then awarded a grade which consists of his or her individual score plus bonus points if the group score average has improved from the last task. Every two or three tasks, the base score (on which bonus points are based) is updated.
5. **Totaling members' individual scores:** The individual scores of members are added up and all members receive the total of all the scores.
6. **Averaging of members' individual scores:** The individual scores of members are added up and an average is taken. All team members receive this average.
7. **Group score on a single product:** Team members work together to produce one product and all students receive the grade given the product.
8. **Randomly selecting one member's paper to score:** After working or studying together, each group member completes the task individually. One product is then randomly chosen and all team members receive the grade awarded this product.
9. **All members receive the lowest score:** After working or studying together, each group member completes his or her own work. All members then receive the lowest score of the team. This method dramatically improves the performance of low achievers since everyone in the group is motivated to help him or her achieve.

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#### References

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