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# A Rough Guide to Reading Partners

## A cross-age, peer-tutoring approach



This NEPS Good Practice Guide was developed by educational psychologists. It is based on current knowledge in this area. It is intended as a guide only. Not all the suggestions here will apply to any one student or situation.

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## A cross-age, peer tutoring approach

### The Reading Partner Scheme

The programme set out here is described as a Reading Partners Scheme. It is a cross-aged peer tutoring approach, in that the tutor would normally be at least two years older than the tutee. It is possible to run such a programme in mainstream primary or secondary schools, or indeed in a special school setting. Schools are encouraged to select children with literacy difficulties to participate in the scheme both as tutors and tutees. The emphasis is on the importance of the partnership being egalitarian. Although the terms *tutor* and *tutee* are preferred in the academic literature, I prefer the terms *helper* and *learner*, as students can easily understand these terms.

Participation in a Reading Partners Scheme should have a number of benefits;

- increased reading skill of learners and of helpers
- increasing confidence and self-esteem of helpers
- creating a positive attitude to reading for both parties

### Managing a Reading Partner Scheme

In order for a Reading Partners Scheme to be successful, a named teacher must have overall responsibility for co-ordinating the programme, and this will need some time allocation. This can be a Learning Support/ Resource Teacher or can be another member of the school staff who can give some time and energy to the project.

### Who should participate in such a scheme?

Reading interventions normally target those who need additional help with reading. Schools may choose to target struggling readers, both as readers and as helpers, while others may be invited to participate in order to build their self-esteem or their social skills. Generally, identifying those who need extra help with reading can be done through the schools' own screening and through information from the Class

Teachers, Learning Support/ Resource Teacher. Participation in a Reading Partner Scheme may be particularly suitable for children at Classroom Support and School Support level intervention, as described in the Continuum of Support documents.

Attendance is a key issue and, if a child has poor attendance, there needs to be some contingency in place to address the needs of the partner. For example, there could be a substitute helper/ learner available.

Models of partnerships include:

- Sixth class helpers working with younger learners
- Transition year students working with First years
- Older special school pupils working with younger special school pupils

### **Selecting Helpers**

Students can be selected by Learning Support Teachers, nominated by Class Teachers or can volunteer.

It is important to note that helpers may have reading skills that would be considered delayed in comparison to the mainstream population, and some may even be weak in comparison to their own classroom peers. For example, a fourteen-year old helper may only have a reading age of nine years. In fact, this does not prove to be a difficulty if the helper and learner are carefully matched, with the learner having significantly weaker skills and the helper having at least enough expertise to be helpful to the learner.

When selecting 'helpers' it can be very beneficial for the helper group to include some children with advanced reading skills and/or high social status. This avoids the possibility that participation as a helper is seen as a negative stigma (the scheme is perceived as being for weak readers). A very successful way to engage weaker older readers in the scheme is to 'reframe' their difficulties. For example, while acknowledging that their own reading skills might not be perfect, it is an opportunity to value the work they have done, for example: *'You have made so much progress...are doing so well... and of course, you know what it's like for younger kids when reading is tricky... so you will be really understanding...'* This puts the helper in

a positive role. It can be particularly beneficial to sixth class weak readers who may be ready to 'graduate' from a learning support setting and who need to build their confidence before transfer to secondary school.

### **Matching Partners**

There is some initial work in managing the logistics of matching partners. When matching partnerships, it is important to consider both chronological and reading ages. Ideally, there should be at least a two year gap on both, and often times the gap can be considerably greater. Anecdotal evidence suggests that learners prefer their partners to be a number of years older, perhaps because this age difference legitimises the difference in reading ability. Same sex reading partners seemed to work best socially. There may also be factors of personality or social issues to be considered.

### **A Time, a Place and a Book**

Reading partners need to have access to a range of books, including fiction and non-fiction and books with high interest and low reading age. These might be available in the learner's classroom, in the school library or in a resource/ learning support room.

Partnerships should ideally meet three times per week or more. Meetings can happen during lunchtime, at designated times in the school day (such as immediately after lunch) or after school. Each meeting will need approximately 20 minutes. A satisfying block of time for partners to meet might be for one term (approximately 3 months). This time-frame allows for a relationship to build up between the partners, but does not create an unlimited commitment. The model chosen in any one school will depend on the age and maturity of participants, constraints of the time table and availability of suitable space.

### **Training of Reading Partner Helpers**

It is important that the children understand how paired reading works before they begin. Accordingly, helpers need to be trained. This can be done in a single session, delivered by a teacher in the school.

A typical training session might follow the outline below;

- Nominated helpers are invited in a group to a training session.
- They are complimented on their ability to read and praised for their assumed progress over the years.
- Students are also encouraged to reflect on what it had been like to learn to read.
- The scheme is briefly outlined and students are told very clearly that participation in the scheme involves a commitment, and their consent is sought before further training progresses.
- The three key tasks are then explained; to remember to go to appointed meeting place at the right time, to listen to a child read, to be friendly.
- The strategy of Pause, Prompt, Praise (outlined below) is explained.
- The process of using these strategies can be role played by adults.
- Helpers then have the opportunity to practice the skill with another helper.

Pause, Prompt, Praise is a simple approach suitable for use by peer tutors (see Wheldall 1995). The procedure involves the following simple steps:

- the child encounters an unfamiliar word;
- instead of stepping in immediately and giving the word, the teacher/tutor waits a few seconds for the child to work it out;
- if the child is not successful, the teacher/tutor prompts the child by suggesting he or she perhaps guess from the meaning of the passage, or attend to the initial letter, or read on to the end of the sentence, etc.;
- when the child cannot get the word after brief prompting, the teacher/tutor quickly supplies the word;
- the child is also praised for self-correcting while reading

This initial training only needs about twenty minutes. At this point the matched learners can be invited to join the training. Responsibilities for the learner include remembering meeting times, coming to the appointed place, selecting a book and keeping a record of each session (if the learner is very young, the helper may have this responsibility). The readability of the book chosen is primarily a matter for learner selection. In the event that the book proves 'too hard' during a session,

helpers are advised to read it to the learner and, at the end of the session, ask the teacher/ co-ordinator to supply an 'easier' book for next time.

During the second part of the training session these learner responsibilities are described. Both partners complete their first record form together. This gives them a chance to learn each other's names, identify the place where the partnership will meet and make a note of the meeting days. There is also time for a brief trial reading partner session, closely supervised by the attending adults.

Finally, the incentive of earning a certificate can be introduced to the group. The Reading Partners Certificates can be earned by partnerships that have met successfully over a number of times during the term. Some schools like to offer a hierarchy of awards, for example:

- A certificate for partnerships meeting ten times
- A certificate for partnerships meeting twenty times
- A certificate for completion of the Reading Partners Scheme

In all the training sessions do not require more than forty minutes.

### **Monitoring the Reading Partner Scheme**

Some amount of monitoring and trouble shooting may be needed. The most common difficulty is absenteeism of one of the partners, but difficulties may also arise in relation to the selection of books at an appropriate level, the availability of suitable places to meet or personality clashes. It has been found that some ongoing feedback to helpers is helpful in sustaining commitment.

The co-ordinator (and possibly class teachers, depending on the context) needs to take on responsibilities such as remembering to encourage helpers to keep appointments, helping learners to select appropriate books and accommodating partnerships in the classrooms. The reading records, which are the primary source of evidence of attendance, need to be monitored and collected periodically. Certificates need to be awarded as needed. Whenever possible, it is helpful to integrate such a scheme into structures already in place in the school. For example, the reading partner certificates and prizes, can be included in the termly/ annual prize giving assemblies.

In some schemes, the Reading Partners' co-ordinator may bring partners to visit the local library as part of the scheme or plan a celebration/party for participants after completion of the scheme.

## **Conclusion**

Peer reading is an effective form of literacy intervention for students in many educational settings. It not only is easily established, but is cost effective. For many participants, not only are there impressive gains in literacy skills, there are also other gains, such as improved self-esteem, attendance and social skills. Dearden (1998) argues that if peer learning '*is of such value to both parties involved, then there needs to be a way of ensuring it happens*' (p257). It is hoped that this Rough Guide will encourage teachers to accept the challenge and implement such a programme in their own schools.

## **References**

- Dearden, J. (1998). 'Cross Age Peer Mentoring in Action', *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 13 (4), 250 - 257.
- Wheldall, K. (1995). 'Helping readers who are behind', *Educational Monitor* 6, (1) 23-5.

A version of this guidance was previously published in the Learn Journal:  
Nugent, M. (2008) A Rough Guide to Reading Partners- A cross age, peer tutoring approach. *Learn, Journal of the Irish Learning Support Association*, Vol 30, 76-82.

# Reading Partners

Your reading partner is \_\_\_\_\_

You will be meeting in \_\_\_\_\_

Your meeting times are \_\_\_\_\_

# Reading Partners

Your reading partner is \_\_\_\_\_

You will be meeting in \_\_\_\_\_

Your meeting times are \_\_\_\_\_



# Reading Partner Record Form

For Week Beginning Monday \_\_\_\_\_

Names \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_

Day/ Date	Book/Page	Comment	Today was...

## Help words

good very tried lovely hard worked enjoyed funny boring  
effort excellent reading

# Reading Partner

# CERTIFICATE

Awarded to

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In recognition of hard work,  
co-operation and reliability in the  
Reading Partner Scheme

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Signed

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