

***Case study 1: An Evidence-based practice review report.***

***Theme: School/Setting Based Interventions for Social, Emotional and Mental Health.***

***How effective is the peer-mediated intervention, Stay, Play, Talk, in improving social communication skills for preschoolers with identified social communication difficulties?***

**Summary**

Social communication is a fundamental life skill that enables an individual to understand and use appropriate conversational skills, to communicate effectively with others and develop meaningful relationships. Preschool settings provide a safe environment to practice and develop these skills during early childhood, however, children with social communication difficulties may not respond to opportunities for social learning in the same way as their typically developing peers. *Stay, Play, Talk* is a peer-mediated intervention which involves training peers to stay, play and talk with the target child, who presents with social communication difficulties. This review aims to assess the efficacy of Stay, Play, Talk on preschoolers with identified social communication needs. Five studies were selected using the pre-determined inclusion and exclusion criteria and their weight of evidence was assessed. Two studies displayed a significant difference in the target child's social communicative behaviour from baseline to treatment conditions and during a maintenance phase. These studies included target children with less severe social communication difficulties and the peer groupings had been carefully considered. Due to the inconsistency of the results and heterogeneity of the studies, it is difficult to directly compare these findings. Potential recommendations for future educational practice are discussed, alongside further research suggestions.







If effective, SPT offers a feasible early-intervention to support the target child's social communication needs, whilst promoting an inclusive preschool ethos. This would provide an impactful recommendation within Educational Psychologist (EP) practice in the UK.

### ***Current Review***

This review will focus on the implementation of SPT in preschools, to determine the efficacy of using this intervention to improve the social communication difficulties for target children. Although SPT teaches peer buddies the valuable skills of being able to interact and engage with children who exhibit social difficulties, this review will focus specifically on the social communicative development of the target child, as they are most at risk of social isolation and academic failure (Barber et al., 2015).

#### *Review Question:*

How effective is the peer-mediated intervention, Stay, Play, Talk, in improving social communication skills for preschoolers with identified social communication difficulties?

## **Critical Review of the Evidence**

### ***Systematic Literature Search***

A systematic search of the literature was conducted using the online databases: PsycINFO (Ovid), Education Resource Information Centre (ERIC, EBSCO) and Web of Science (EBSCO). A scoping search on Google Scholar identified the commonly used language within the identified research topic. These concepts were combined to create a comprehensive literature search, presented in Table 1.

From conducting a literature search in all three databases and removing the duplicates, 115 studies were identified. These were screened from their titles and abstracts based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, as specified in Table 2. Where studies did not meet the criteria, they were excluded from the review. From the ten studies that remained, each text was fully screened and assessed using the criteria in Table 2. Five of these studies were excluded, for further details refer to Appendix A. Figure 1 shows a flow diagram to illustrate this process.



**Table 2***Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

	Feature	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Rationale
1	Target child and peer buddies' age	Preschoolers (aged between 1.5 – 6 yrs)	Children >6 yrs & <1.5 yrs	Stay, Play, Talk is an intervention designed for preschool children, who are between 1.5 – 6 yrs old.
2	Target child's criteria	Presenting social-communication difficulty or diagnosis, including Autism and Down's syndrome	Age-appropriate social skills	The intervention is targeted for children with social communication difficulties. This includes children with a variety of disabilities (Ledford et al., 2016).
3	Peer buddies' criteria	Age-appropriate social skills	Presenting social communication difficulty or diagnosis	The peers are trained on how to help their target child with their social skills, so need to have the appropriate skills and abilities to do so.
4	Setting	Preschool setting, including: University development centres; integrated preschools; child care centres; early childhood programs	The home environment; primary school; secondary school etc.	Review question focussed on implementing SPT in a preschool educational setting.













participants, whereas Maich et al. (2018) conducted recruitment via community-based consultants working with individuals with ASD. As not all studies reported the process of selecting their participants with replicable precision, they scored lower on question 1b in the WoE A protocol. Overall, all studies achieved mostly all the criteria within the WoE A 'Description of Participants and Settings' so were given the 'medium' weighting, with two studies meeting the threshold for a 'high' weighting (Maich et al., 2018; Severini et al., 2019).

A description of the intervention setting was also included. Interventions that were conducted in naturalistic preschool settings were awarded a higher WoE C, as the purpose of this review is to support school-based interventions. Three of the studies were conducted

single participant or across three different participants. All studies included at least three target participants, apart from Severini et al. (2019) where only two target pupils were investigated, so an A-B-A-B withdrawal design was used. As all studies included at least three demonstrations of experimental effect, this is reflected in the 'high' rating for question 5a in the WoE A protocol.

### ***Intervention***

The focus of the review question was on the peer-mediated intervention, SPT. The fidelity of SPT is dependent on the peer training, resources, and relationship between target child and peer confederate. These three categories were included in the WoE C criteria.

SPT involves training peer confederates to stay with their peer, play with their peer and talk with their peer. Ledford et al. (2016) recommends regular training that includes peer buddies and target child, so they are both involved in the process. Three of the selected studies (Maich et al., 2018; Milam et al., 2020; Severini et al., 2019) included detailed training with peer buddies and target children so received 'high' weightings, compared to two studies (Barber et al., 2016; Goldstein et al., 1997) where training was only conducted with the peer buddies, so a 'medium' rating was awarded.

Although variations in the training content was not reflected in the WoE, it is important to note that some studies included additional training topics. Sensitivity training was provided for all participants in Barber et al. (2016) and Goldstein et al. (1997) studies. This involves sensitising participants to the different attention-getting and requesting behaviours that target children may use. Similarly, Maich et al. (2018) conducted diversity awareness training for all participants, which is an adult-led activity that focuses on similarities and differences. Where there was an extended school break for participants in the study by Milam et al. (2020), booster training sessions were applied to recap the core themes. Whilst reviewing the effectiveness of SPT, it is important to consider the variation of training that was applied.

For the resources for SPT, Ledford et al. (2016) recommends using play materials in preschool settings; visual reminders of the taught strategies; adult led reinforcements; and data collection tools. As all studies included an exhaustive list of the resources, they scored a 'high' rating in the 'Intervention Resources' section of the WoE C.



Three studies (Barber et al., 2016; Goldstein et al., 1997; Milam et al., 2020) used at least three different social outcome measures, including a generalisation phase, providing a comprehensive overview for the target's child social communicative behaviour. This was reflected in a 'high' WoE C for the 'Scope of Outcome Measures'.

### ***Results***

To investigate the relationship between baseline social-communicative behaviour and treatment



**Table 5**

*Effect Sizes to show the difference between the type of social communication on target children from baseline to treatment and baseline to maintenance.*

Study	Outcome	Target Child	Baseline V Intervention			Baseline V Maintenance			WoE D
			Tau - U		CI (95%)	Tau - U		CI (95%)	
Barber et al. (2016)	Combined initiation and response ("social interaction")	A1	0.313	0.269	-0.152<>0.777	-0.29	0.739	-1<>0.671-	2.14
		A2	0.04	0.867	0.469<>0.531	-0.286	0.558	1<>0.563	
		A3	- 0.67	0.005	-0.395<>0.484	0.80	0.206	-1<>0.517	
Goldstein et al. (1997)	Number of interactions per 10-minute sample with class peers	B1	0.84**	<0.001	0.345<>1	1	0.127	-0.283<>1	2.26
		B2	1***	0.002	0.356<>1	1	0.064	-0.059<>1	
		B3	0.99***	0.003	0.347<>1	1	0.157	-0.386<>1	
		B4	0.95***	0.005	0.281<>1	1***	0.025	0.123<>1	
		C1	0.63**	0.018	0.108<>1	1***	0.046	0.020<>1	
		C2	0.89***	0.003	0.308<>1	1***	0.020	0.157<>1	
		C3	0.91***	0.001	0.361<>1	0.96***	0.019	0.158<>1	
		C4	0.80**	0.023	0.110<>1	1***	0.025	0.123<>1	

Maich et al. (2018)	Mean social interactions across 10-minute data collection intervals	D1	0.029	0.935	-0.661<>0.718	0.87	0.053	-0.010<>1	2.11
		D2	0.200	0.570	-0.490<>0.890	1	0.053	-0.012<>1	
		D3	-0.200	0.558	-0.869<>0.469	0.11	0.847	-0.912<>1	
Milam et al. (2020)	Duration of social play (mean number of seconds)	E1	1***	0.007	0.278<>1	1***	0.017	0.181<>1	2.26
		E2	0.978***	<0.001	0.444<>1	1***	0.006	0.294<>1	
		E3	0.924***	<0.001	0.512<>1	0.96***	<0.001	0.452<>1	
Severini et al. (2019)	Number of social interactions between PB and TC	F1	0.475	0.164	-0.194<>1	0.58	0.071	-0.049<>1	2.24
		F2	-1	0.317	-1<>0.960	-0.83	0.211	-1<>0.473	

*Note.* Starred values are considered significant with a  $p$ -value  $< 0.05$ . \*small effect size 0 – 0.31; \*\*medium effect size 0.32 – 0.84; \*\*\*large effect size 0.85 – 1

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

### ***Conclusions***

This review aimed to investigate the effectiveness of using the peer-mediated intervention, SPT, in improving the social communication skills of preschoolers with identified social communication difficulties. The results across the five included studies for preschoolers were inconsistent, where participants in only two of the studies, with either moderate developmental delay (Goldstein et al., 1997) or social delay (Milam et al., 2020), had significant improvements in their social communication skills. These positive outcomes for target children were also sustained 11.04 Tf6hese posi



### ***Further Research***

Future research should consider investigating the long-term impact of SPT on the attitudes towards children with identified social-communication difficulties. Case studies have revealed a qualitative difference between friendships with two typically developing peers and friendships between a typically developing peer and child with SEN, which often mirrors a 'helper-helpee' dynamic (Van der Klift & Kunc, 2002). Although SPT aims to equip typically developing children with the relevant strategies to engage with their target peers, this may also discourage the authenticity of a reciprocated friendship. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to investigate whether SPT has a long-term impact on children's understanding and social schemas towards children with disabilities. It is also recommended for future research to be conducted in the UK and to utilise their teaching staff to deliver and implement SPT, to provide more externally valid conclusions.



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## Appendix A: Details of Excluded Studies

**Table A1**

*List of excluded studies at full review*

Reference	Criteria Number	Rationale
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Van Rhijn, T., Osborne, C., Ranby, S., Maich, K., Hall, C., Rzepecki, L., & Hemmerich, A. (2019). Peer play in i

## Appendix B: Details of Included Studies

**Table B1**

*Overview of the Included Studies: Mapping the Field*

	Study Design	Sample Size	Peer Groupings	Setting	Presenting Difficulty for TC	Intervention	Country	Outcome Variable for TC
1. Barber et al. (2015)	Multiple baseline across participants design	6	Dyads	University Child Development Centre	ASD	SPT over 16, 20-min intervention sessions (twice a week for 8 weeks)	U.S.	Combined initiation and response (“social interaction”)  Early Communicative Index
2. Goldstein et al. (1997)	Multiple baseline across participants design	<i>Cohort 1:</i> 8  <i>Cohort 2:</i> 8	Dyads	Developmentally integrated preschool	Moderate Developmental Disabilities	SPT occurred during three time points: free play, snack time, activity time	U.S.	Number of social interactions per 10-min sample with class peers
3. Maich et al. (2018)	Single-subject AB design	3	Whole class	Child care centre	ASD	Four step training procedure	Canada	Mean social interactions across 10-min data collection  Researcher-created Social Skills Questionnaire for TC

*Note.* TC refers to target child; PB refers to peer buddy



## **2. *Dependent Variable***

(a) Dependent variable is described with operational precision.

(b) Each dependent variable is measured with a procedure that generates a quantifiable index.

(c) Measurement of the dependent variable is valid and described with replicable precision.

### 3. *Independent Variable*

(a) Independent variable is described with replicable precision.

- All of the criteria are fulfilled = 3
- Mostly all of the criteria are fulfilled = 2
- Limited criteria are fulfilled = 1
- None of the criteria are fulfilled = 0

(b) Independent variable is systematically manipulated and under the control of the experimenter.

- All of the criteria are fulfilled = 3
- Mostly all of the criteria are fulfilled = 2
- Limited criteria are fulfilled = 1
- None of the criteria are fulfilled = 0

(c) Overt measurement of the fidelity of implementation for the independent variable is highly desirable.

- All of the criteria are fulfilled = 3
- Mostly all of the criteria are fulfilled = 2
- Limited criteria are fulfilled = 1
- None of the criteria are fulfilled = 0

### 4. *Baseline*

(a) The majority of single-subject research studies will include a baseline phase that provides repeated measurement of a dependent variable and establishes a pattern of responding that can be used to predict the pattern of future performance, if introduction or manipulation of the independent variable did not occur.

- All of the criteria are fulfilled = 3
- Mostly all of the criteria are fulfilled = 2
- Limited criteria are fulfilled = 1
- None of the criteria are fulfilled = 0



(b) Baseline conditions are described with replicable precision.

- All of the criteria are fulfilled = 3
- Mostly all of the criteria are fulfilled = 2
- Limited criteria are fulfilled = 1
- None of the criteria are fulfilled = 0

**5. *Experimental control/internal validity***

(a) The design provides at least three demonstrations of experimental effect at three different points in time.

- All of the criteria are fulfilled = 3
- Mostly all of the criteria are fulfilled = 2
- Limited criteria are fulfilled = 1
- None of the criteria are fulfilled = 0

(b) The design controls for common threats to internal validity (e.g., permits elimination of rival hypotheses).

- All of the criteria are fulfilled = 3
- Mostly all of the criteria are fulfilled = 2
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(c) The results document a pattern that demonstrates experimental control.

## 6. *External Validity*

(a) Experimental effects are replicated across participants, settings, or materials to establish external validity.

- All of the criteria are fulfilled = 3
- Mostly all of the criteria are fulfilled = 2
- Limited criteria are fulfilled = 1
- None of the criteria are fulfilled = 0

## 7. *Social validity*

(a) The dependent variable is socially important.

- All of the criteria are fulfilled = 3
- Mostly all of the criteria are fulfilled = 2
- Limited criteria are fulfilled = 1
- None of the criteria are fulfilled = 0

(b) The magnitude of change in the dependent variable resulting from the intervention is socially important.

- All of the criteria are fulfilled = 3
- Mostly all of the criteria are fulfilled = 2
- Limited criteria are fulfilled = 1
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(c) Implementation of the independent variable is practical and cost effective.

(d) Social validity is enhanced by implementation of the independent variable over extended time periods, by typical intervention agents, in typical physical and social contexts.

**Table C1**

*Weight of Evidence (WoE) Calculations*

	Overall Evidence Rating (0 – 3)	Evidence Descriptors
Description of Participants and Settings	2.3	Medium
Dependent Variable	2.6	High
Independent Variable	2.6	High
Baseline	2.5	High
Experimental control/internal validity	2	Medium
External Validity	1	Low
Social Validity	2	Medium

*Note.* <1.5 is low; 1.5 – 2.4 is medium; >2.4 is high

Average Quality of Evidence across the Key Judgement Areas

Individual quality of evidence for each judgement area

Number of judgement areas

## Appendix D: Overview of the WoE A Calculations

**Table D1**

*An overview of the calculated WoE A scores and descriptors for each category identified in the Horner et al. (2005) protocol*

Study	Description of Participants and Settings	Dependent Variable	Category from the WoE A Protocol			External Validity	Social Validity
			Independent Variable	Baseline	Experimental control/internal validity		
Barber et al. (2016)	2.3	2.6	2.6	2.5	2	1	2
Goldstein et al. (1997)	1.7	2.2	2	3	2.3	2	2.25
Maich et al. (2018)	2.6	2.4	1.6	2	2	2	2.75
Milam et al. (2020)	2	2.6	3	1.5	2.3	2	2.5
Severini et al. (2019)	2.6	2.8	3	2.3	2.3	1	2.25

*Note.* <1.4 is low; 1.5 – 2.4 is medium; >2.5 is high

## Appendix E: WoE B Coding Protocol

**Table E1**

*Weight of Evidence (WoE B): Methodological Relevance*

WoE B Rating (Qualitative Descriptor)	Criteria	Rational
3 (High)	Randomised control trials	
2 (Medium)	Cohort studies, quasi-experimental studies, single case experimental designs	Petticrew & Roberts (2003) researched the appropriateness of different study designs to investigate the effectiveness of an intervention.
1 (Low)	Qualitative research, survey, case control, non-experimental evaluation	

## Appendix F: WoE C Coding Protocol

**Table F1**

*Weight of Evidence (WoE C): Topic Relevance*

		Weightings	Rational
Relationship between target child and peer confederate	3	Peer buddies have been carefully selected for target children based upon selective criteria and taken children's social history and shared interests into account	Peer-mediated intervention involves the participation of staying, playing and talking between peers. Ledford et al. (2016) outlines what to consider when grouping children.
	2	Peer buddies have been carefully selected for target children based upon selective criteria	
	1	Peer buddies have been randomly allocated to target children	
Location of intervention	3	Research conducted in the UK	The review question is directed to support school-based interventions in the UK.
	2	Research conducted in OECD countries	
	1	Research conducted in countries outside the OECD	
Intervention setting	3	Intervention occurs in naturalistic preschool settings and routines across the day (e.g. free play, break time)	To improve external validity, it is preferred for the study to be conducted in a naturalistic setting.
	2	Intervention occurs in naturalistic setting, but contrived by the researcher	
	1		

Intervention fidelity	3	Overt measures of fidelity are documented for accurate replication, including a clear outline of the intervention environment, the type and number of adult prompts, an adequate description of the training procedures (i.e. amount of sessions, an overview of what was taught), the level of adult feedback and reward systems used.	Overt measures of the intervention will ensure the quality of the intervention is maintained.
	2	Overt measures of fidelity are documented, but not to the same level of detail for accurate replication.	
	1	Little/no consideration for fidelity of the intervention	
Training on Stay, Play, Talk	3	Detailed training on each component of the intervention (stay, play, talk) have been conducted with target children and their peer confederates	Ledford et al. (2016) recommends conducting the training with peer buddies to practice with the child they will also be working with.
	2	Detailed training on each component of the intervention (stay, play, talk) have been conducted with only peer confederates	
	1	Limited detail on the different components of the training	
Intervention resources (play materials, visual reminders, reinforcers, data collection tools)	3	All materials stated have been included	The recommended materials needed for the intervention
	2	Three out of the four materials have been included	
	1	One or less materials have been included	
Scope of outcome measures	3	At least 3 measures of social outcomes are reported (e.g. number of social interactions, duration of social play, questionnaires related to social skills), including at least one generagsteast one generagsteastre their e ge	

