

Buddy Programme

Introduction

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In the UK over 70% of school aged pupils with autism are educated in mainstream settings. Pupils with autism educated in mainstream settings are, however, more likely to be victims of bullying and to experience fewer and lower quality social interactions and friendships than their peers in those settings. Peer relationships and friendships are particularly crucial during adolescence when pupils are at secondary school. The majority of interventions designed to support peer interactions and friendship development are aimed at primary aged children. Of those that do look to support secondary school aged pupils the time or financial investment required to implement them can be prohibitively expensive and unrealistic for the majority of maintained mainstream secondary schools. Furthermore, comprehensive reviews of existing interventions have highlighted that, whilst many of them have their merits, they also have a range of weaknesses either in terms of content or the extent to which any skills taught are maintained and generalised.

The Buddy System Project has involved the development of an intervention that seeks to improve the mainstream secondary school experience for autistic pupils. We have created a programme that not only supports autistic pupils to develop and practise social skills but also seeks to increase their peers' and the school staff's understanding of autism. In developing the programme we have taken into account the perspectives of autistic adolescents and young adults in terms of their experiences of social skills interventions in mainstream settings. The focus of the intervention is not on seeking to try to 'normalise' autistic pupils but to cultivate the common understanding between individuals that is required for social interaction so that autistic pupils and their mainstream peers have a better understanding of each other and misconceptions are reduced.

The programme is delivered by school staff following initial training from Bridge staff. Whole school and staff awareness sessions are delivered by Bridge staff. The programme comprises twelve sessions aimed at addressing specific areas of social skills support for autistic pupils taking part. This will also include online social skills acknowledging that this is a key social environment for adolescents and a small homework component so that parents and/or carers are involved in the programme. Running parallel to these sessions will be six sessions in which any autistic pupils taking part in the programme will work alongside some of their neuro-typical peers on a school related project (such as creating a video that introduces the school to new pupils). These sessions are facilitated by the same staff taking the twelve social skills sessions so they can assess if the skills worked on are being generalised to a more naturalistic setting. Pupils will also be observed at lunch and break times to get a further indication of the extent to which skills have been generalised. Following the completion of the programme pupils and staff who have taken part will complete a short questionnaire and semi-structured interview to feedback their opinion on the programme. This feedback will then inform further development of the programme.