Behavior Tip of the Month: Precision Partnering

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Precision Partnering is a way to change up your partner routines to improve both academic and behavior outcomes during class discussions and partner work. When you adopt the motto of “Everybody doing everything”, everybody gets to think, and everybody’s voice is heard. Everybody wins!

Breaking the “Who can tell me...” habit.

When you ask the class this question, often two things happen. The “hands up immediately” students throw their hands up and/or blurt out because they know the answer. They want you to know they know. The “don’t know/don’t care” students often tune out because they know you will call on those students whose hands are up and are sitting nicely. If you randomly call on them, they often need you to repeat the question or answer incorrectly and feel less successful.

If your routine is, instead, that you pose a question, give a little think time, and then have structured partner talk before taking answers, you hold everyone accountable for doing the thinking (and learning!). You can set up the routine to include sentence frames for, “I agree with you because...” or “I disagree with you because...”. Then call on students to share what their partner said, rather than what they said, so the students know they have to listen and be able to paraphrase what their
partner said. You can see that this brings in all of the speaking and listening standards that are in the core, too!

What is the difference between just talking to the peer next to you and a “precision partner”? The practice of letting students “choose a partner” can lead to many problems - students take forever finding one, some are more popular partners than others, and some partnerships are likely to be off task, and/or need more support academically. Setting up partnerships ahead of time and changing them often and for different subject areas can solve these problems. You are partnering them with someone who is “a slightly more capable peer” (remember Vygotsky?). Keep in mind, however, that some partnerships will need more structure than others and more support with how to have academic conversations.

How do I get started with assigning the partners? Here’s how to set up your classroom for precision partnering:

1. Plan ahead! Organize partners for a variety of tasks. You may have different partners for different activities (a math partner, a reading comprehension partner, a writing partner). You will likely keep the same partnerships for a while.

The 4 Ls of Partner Talk

Look at your partner when you talk to him or her.

Lean close to your partner, so you can focus on him or her.

Listen carefully to what your partner says.

Lower your voice so just your partner can hear you.

From Dr. Kate Kinsella’s work on academic language
2. Rank your students from highest to lowest in the skill you are focused on. Your most proficient student is #1. Your least proficient is #28 (or however many students you have). You then split the class in half and match up #1 with #15, #2 with #16... #14 with #28. If there are partnerships that will not work because of behavior or other issues, you can adjust within a few numbers.

3. Arrange students so they are sitting next to their partner. Find a way to mark who is Partner 1 and who is Partner 2 (stickers on desks, a star next to their name, who is closest to the door, etc.). If you have an odd number of students, you can either have a student who goes to where a partner is absent (good to use a high student for this “floater” position), or have two Partner 2s in one group.

4. Who goes first? Usually the higher partner, but it depends on your purpose. Sometimes it might make sense to just take turns.

Model, model, model.

If you want your students to be successful partners, you will need to model, model, model the kind of partner work you want! Use a student as your partner when you first model what partner work looks like and sounds like. Give both good and bad examples. Any time the format changes or the purpose changes, you will need to model what you expect.

If you are using a sentence frame, model how to say each sentence. “I agree with your answer to this problem because ______”.

Model how to give both corrective and positive feedback to each other.

Model what the 4 Ls look like. Decide what the noise level should be.

Model what it looks like to be “elbow partners” or “knee to knee” partners.

Monitor as students talk with each other. Give feedback on both content and behavior. This is a great time to assess understanding.

You will really need to plan this at first. Once you and your students become more fluent with partner work, it becomes easier.