

Buddy Bench

Elementary Education



Interview Overview

The “buddy bench” or “friendship bench” has become a popular intervention in primary schools to reduce social isolation and encourage friendship-building in young students, particularly during recess activity time. This simple intervention involves adding a bench (or a few benches) around school playgrounds, designated for students to find a friend to play with. These benches are often decorated in bright colors and labeled as a “buddy bench.” Students who need a friend to play with can sit on the bench during recess and other students are encouraged to invite those they see sitting on the bench to play with them.

Intervention Guide

Grade Level:	K - 6th
Materials:	A sturdy bench, paint to decorate if desired
Duration:	Only requires set up time. Teachers may wish to take additional time to instruct/ role-play with students on how to use the bench.
Implementation:	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Purchase or build a small bench to be the designated buddy bench. You may decorate it or assist students in doing so.2. Introduce the concept of the buddy bench to the whole school, and send a newsletter to parents explaining the intervention.3. Have teachers explain buddy bench rules to students and post a list of rules in the classroom. Possible list of rules explained below.4. Have teachers role-play with students on how to use the bench.

Does it work?

Though the buddy bench has gained popularity in elementary schools globally, there has been limited research completed assessing its effectiveness at improving student relationships and belonging. Recently, a study was completed involving students in grades 1-6 at a Title I school in central Utah, United States (Griffin et al., 2017). Two separate playgrounds were observed (one for students grades 1-3, another for students grades 4-6).

"Buddy benches" were put in prominent places on the school playgrounds so students could easily recognize and find them. The following rules were posted near each bench and in each classroom: "If you are alone: 1. Sit at the buddy bench. 2. If someone invites you to play with them, say 'yes' or 'no, thank you.' If you see someone who is alone at the bench: 1. Join them and invite them to play, talk or walk with you. 2. If they say 'no,' say 'okay, maybe next time,' and walk away" (Griffin et al., 2017, p.29). It was found that the bench was more frequently used by younger students, but there were more play invitations accepted among the older group. With the buddy bench intervention, solitary behavior among students decreased by 19-24% compared to baseline levels. When the buddy bench was removed, solitary behavior returned to near-baseline levels, but immediately was reduced when the bench was again added to the playgrounds. A few concerns presented were that some students reported feeling uncomfortable having to use the bench themselves, and some teachers felt that rules weren't followed appropriately (Griffin et al., 2017).

Another study evaluated students' perceptions of the buddy bench activity and its impact on their perceptions of self, others, and play during recess (Clarke, 2008, p. 11). This qualitative case study was completed at an elementary school in the Western US with 500 students. Student perceptions of the buddy bench were acquired by having them create two drawings- one of the playground with the buddy bench, and one of the playground without the bench. Students were then asked to describe their drawings. This was based on research done by child psychologist Richard Coles that children often express their views of the world through art (Clarke, 2008, p. 11). Data was also collected through interviews with parents and school staff. For many students, the buddy bench represented solidarity, worthiness, empowerment, and an improvement in playground climate. Students also reported that with the buddy bench intervention they developed a greater understanding that everyone feels lonely at times (Clarke, 2018).

References:

- Clarke, K. M. (2018). Benching playground loneliness: Exploring the meanings of the playground buddy bench. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 11(1), 9–21.
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- Griffin, A. A., Caldarella, P., Sabey, C. V., & Heath, M. A. (2017). The effects of a buddy bench on elementary students' solitary behavior during recess. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 10(1), 27–36.
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