

Students' social skills flourish best in groups with similar skill levels

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Janine Stichter, professor of special education in the College of Education, found that children who need assistance improving their social skills might benefit more when grouped with peers who have similar social skill levels. Credit: MU College of Education

Research shows that the behavior of the people you most spend time

with can affect your own behavior, for better or worse. Now, researchers at the University of Missouri have found that children who need assistance improving their social skills might benefit more when grouped with peers who have similar social skill levels, rather than with peers who have a similar disability or disorder.

"We know that how you group children together in an [intervention](#) situation matters immensely," said Janine Stichter, professor of special education at the MU College of Education. "However, we have to consider what types of groups work better than others and create the best positive behavior outcomes."

Stichter and her team worked with nearly 300 students with varying social [disorders](#) across 34 middle schools to test what conditions make group-based social interventions more effective. Current practices are often ineffective, she says, because children are conveniently grouped together by matching class schedules or similar disorders. Stichter found that grouping by disability or disorder is less successful at creating positive [behavior](#) changes than grouping children by similar social abilities.

"One child might have difficulties looking people in the face, while another might have issues staying on topic," Stichter said. "However, if they both are at the level where they can interact and realize they have behaviors that need to be corrected, they can communicate effectively and help each other in a group setting. They essentially learn together."

For example, it might not be ideal to form groups made up solely of children on the autism spectrum. Instead, it could be more beneficial for children's development to group them with others who have similar social abilities but have a wide array of challenges.

"Social skills aren't just about friendship. It's about being able to react to

and thrive in your environment," Stichter said. "That's why families and practitioners have this drive to help children as early and as effectively as we possibly can. If we're not taking the time to match [children](#) with the correct interventions, then we run the risk of wasting time and possibly hampering their development."

"Influence of homogeneity of student characteristics in a group-based social competence intervention," was published in *School Psychology Quarterly*.

More information: Janine P. Stichter et al, Influence of homogeneity of student characteristics in a group-based social competence intervention., *School Psychology Quarterly* (2018). [DOI: 10.1037/spq0000261](#)

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