

Cheers for Peers

More and more teachers are letting the kids do some of the teaching.

It was lunchtime at Swasey Central School in Brentwood, New Hampshire, and first-grade teacher Gail Stevens had reached her limit. She'd worked long and hard with one student, Andrea, who still failed to grasp the concept of regrouping in subtraction. What would it take to help her comprehend? Stevens discovered the answer after lunch, when Andrea came running up to her with a friend. They had been writing in sand out on the playground, doing little math problems. Andrea's friend proudly proclaimed: "Mrs. Stevens, you don't have to worry anymore because during recess I taught Andrea how to regroup."

The idea of peer tutoring represents a powerful but neglected instructional tool that appears to be making something of a comeback in educational circles. Back in the days of the one-room schoolhouse, older or more advanced kids routinely worked one-on-one or in small groups with younger or less knowledgeable students. Teachers needed all the help they could get, with children of so many different ages represented in one classroom. Over the past few decades, though, the instructional method of peer tutoring fell into disuse in schools, perhaps partly because it challenges the concept of the adult teacher as the holder of all knowledge in the classroom.

Yet in an era of growing classroom size and

overburdened teachers, peer and cross-age teaching can help ease a teacher's load by making children instructors. "Students learn more by this method than they would if I were doing all the instructing myself," says Stevens. The economics of peer and cross-age teaching also make sense. According to a recent study conducted at Stanford University in California, peer tutoring is more cost-effective in terms of instructional gains than computer-assisted instruction, smaller class size, or a lengthened school year.

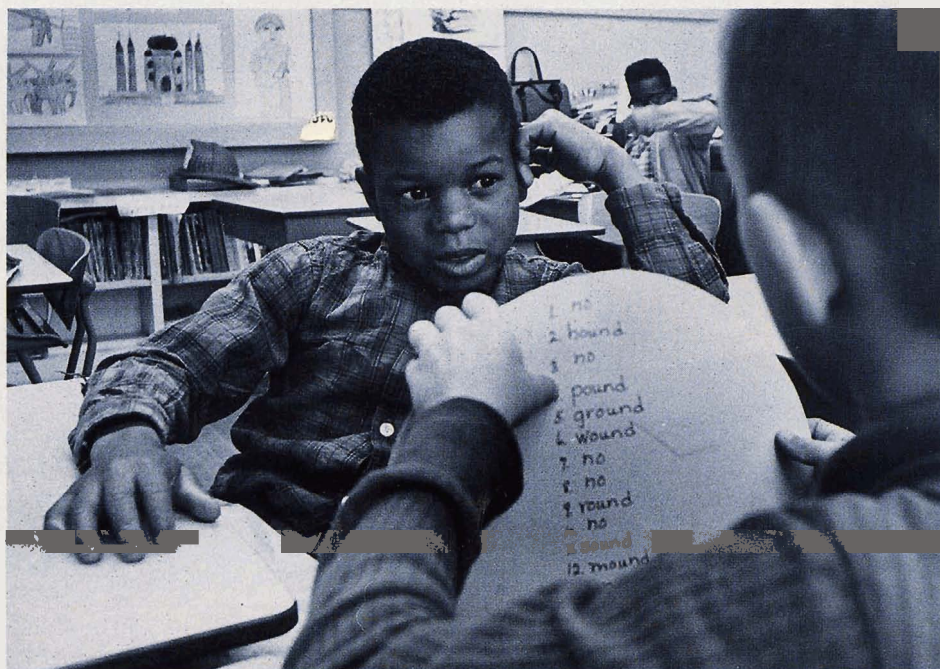
Training the Tutors

A large body of research suggests that peer teaching provides solid academic gains for the children being taught. But what is even more remarkable is that in many studies, the tutors themselves appeared to make strong academic gains by teaching what they already knew—often improving as much as the tutees themselves. This result seems to affirm the old Latin saying *Qui docet discit*: One who teaches, learns.

According to Helen Featherstone, former editor of the *Harvard Education Letter*, "Tutoring gives children an excuse to review the basics; it also forces them to think about how they learn." In line with these observations, an increasing number of tutoring programs are being created in which kids who have trouble reading, those who are potential dropouts, and children with disabilities are asked to serve as tutors. One program turned the tables on the usual learning expectations and had 12 behaviorally disabled students teaching sign language to 24 gifted students twice each week. Such programs boost self-esteem as well as academic performance, by empowering learners to become teachers.

Peer teaching is not

When one student teaches another, both of them learn.



LEARNING CURVE

without its drawbacks, however. Although children informally teach each other all the time, creating a formal tutoring program in school presents a formidable challenge. Robert S. Feldman, professor of social and educational psychology at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, says, "We put teachers in school for four years to learn how to teach. We can't expect students to teach without some extensive training." Untrained student tutors may ridicule other students' mistakes, overly control the teaching session, or simply give up on students who

aren't making much progress. Some research indicates that peer tutoring may be most effective for mastering certain rote skills, like the multiplication tables, or for low-level reading objectives such as identifying phonetic sounds.

When educators are committed to a well-structured program, however, peer tutoring can be a success. One such effort, called Companion Reading, was developed by Grant von Harrison, a professor of educational psychology at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, for kids in the first grade and up. Teachers provide reading lessons for the whole class, and then they train students to work in pairs with classmates for ten-minute

review sessions in which they help each other read selected words and phonetic patterns, or concentrate on reading comprehension or writing tasks. Harrison maintains that this system helps with much more than routine tasks, and that it is especially helpful in teaching reading comprehension. In a tutoring program for fourth through sixth graders in Boise, Idaho, for instance, children have been trained to praise others' successes and to correct errors tactfully, and are themselves reinforced with periodic awards.

What Parents Can Do

In schools where peer teaching is not being implemented, parents can encourage



teachers and school administrators to initiate formal classroom programs. If a school lacks the motivation or financial resources, parents can suggest that the school create more opportunities for cross-age interactions in and out of the classroom. Ways of doing this include setting up combination classes (where a teacher works with children of two or more grade levels), mixed-age school activities (such as extracurricular clubs), and "buddy systems" in which older kids provide informal assistance for their younger charges, teaching them how to take out library books, how to use the school computer, and how to play games in physical education.

Finally, parents can support peer teach-

ing at home by encouraging their children to work with friends or siblings on homework and other school-related projects. Research suggests that siblings who are widely spaced in age tend to work together better than those close in age. And it helps when parents offer the following simple tips to guide young tutors during work sessions at home: avoid criticism, make the task specific, give immediate feedback, and arrange in advance to limit the session to a given amount of time.

Peer tutoring acknowledges and makes use of the natural abilities that many children bring to the learning process. Cross-age teaching in particular creates important educational and emotional

links between children of different ages, allowing the knowledge of one to illuminate the innocence of another. Tutoring provides many kids with a sense of pride and accomplishment that they might not experience in any other way. It creates an atmosphere in which any child can be a teacher, no matter how rudimentary the skill level, since there is always someone who knows less about a given subject. Parents and teachers who understand the value of peer teaching find its results to be well worth the effort. □

Thomas Armstrong is the author of In Their Own Way: Discovering and Encouraging Your Child's Personal Learning Style.



BUCKLE UP FOR SAFETY.

ADD TO YOUR RECREATION ROOM.

DODGE GRAND CARAVAN.

Dodge Grand Caravan is designed for families that love to play. It's the giant-size version of Caravan America's first and only front-wheel drive minivan. With 25 cubic feet of extra room inside, it's big enough for fun-loving families and all their toys. From bikes to backwoods gear, Grand Caravan handles it all. With a car-like feel. An available 3.0L fuel-injected V-6. An available new electronic 4-speed Ultradriv automatic, the most advanced transmission you can buy. Add our new power sunroof and the sky's the limit on fun. Plus, our exclusive 7 year or 70,000 mile Protection Plan** helps assure the good times will last. The 1989 Grand Caravan. A great way to increase your recreation room. Only from Dodge. 7/70*



THE NEW SPIRIT OF DODGE

THE PERFORMANCE DIVISION OF CHRYSLER MOTORS