

Partner-Explore

Use this tool to encourage children to practice negotiating ideas and to identify new possibilities that may not emerge from working alone.

(Note: This tool is designed primarily for classrooms that have regular “choice” time, but can easily be used in other contexts as well.)

Step 1

Before introducing *Partner-Explore*, put children into pairs, and decide on which materials will be made available. Keep in mind the relationships among children you want to foster. Try to balance “support” and “stretch”—i.e., if the material is unfamiliar (*stretch*), pair children who have a strong connection with each other (*support*). Or, if you want to pair two children who haven’t yet connected, give them a material with which both feel comfortable. From time to time, ask children to choose their own partners or materials.

Step 2

Introduce *Partner-Explore* to the class. Start by asking children why they think they are being asked to work in pairs. Ask children to predict what they think will happen. What are they excited about? What are they concerned about? You might also read a related book such as *Will You be my Friend?* (Tafari, 2000), *Peach and Blue* (Kilborne, 1994), *Chester’s Way* (Henkes, 1997), or *Yo! Yes?* (Raschka, 2007).

Step 3

Ask children to choose a material and play or create something together. (For older children [grades 3rd–5th], you can also ask them to respond to an open-ended question.) Ask partners to take turns asking each other a question about the other’s idea before jumping into playing or making together. You can model this with a child or ask children to model this. (The partners will need to stick together for the duration of the activity, so if one person wants to move to another area, both partners will need to agree on where to go next. This will look and sound different depending on the age or stage of the children and their prior experiences with collaboration.)

Step 4

End with clean up and reflection. Ask children to reflect in a whole group meeting:

- What did you discover about yourself, your partner, or the material?
- Did you bump into a problem? What strategies did you try to solve the problem?
- If you weren’t able to solve the problem, what support do you need from our community?
- Did anyone else bump into that problem? Did you try different strategies?
- What surprised you? Where did you find joy in the unexpected?

© 2019 President and Fellows of Harvard College and Opal School. This work is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International](#) license (CC BY-NC-SA). This license allows users to share this work with others, but it cannot be used commercially. To reference this work, please use the following: The Inspiring Inventiveness products were co-developed by Project Zero, a research center at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and Opal School.



Children come to understand that ideas grow when they are shared, challenged by, and negotiated with others.

When given the option to make free choices in the classroom, children tend to fall into comfortable patterns of relationships. Teachers can structure opportunities for children to develop relationships with peers they may not connect with on their own. *Partner-Explore* creates a safe and predictable way for children to engage in play with another child whom they may not otherwise come to know. This practice creates the expectation that every person is a potential collaborator.



Suggested Time Frame

45 minutes - 1 hour

When and How

Partner-Explore can be introduced early in the year and practiced regularly as teachers observe the patterns of relationship between and among children.

For video examples and reflections on practices that inspire inventiveness, become an Opal School Online Sustaining Member at learning.opalschool.org.



Tips and Variations

- Before introducing *Partner-Explore* for the first time, listen for and record the language of collaboration that children are already using (“What do you want to make?” “What’s your idea?” “How do you want to begin?”). It may be helpful to “[crack open](#)” words around collaboration, partnership, growing ideas, or negotiation”. Bring your notes with you to your first meeting to establish norms and suggest possible ways for children to begin.
- Revisit norms and agreements around language as needed. Use an actual dialogue from the class to ground your discussion.
- Be particularly thoughtful when choosing initial partnerships for young children, as their first pairings tend to be especially significant. Initial partners typically become friends whom children are likely to return to or seek out. From time to time, consider asking children to pick a child with whom they have not yet spent much time.
- *Partner-Explore* is useful for revealing children’s habits of mind when they encounter a bump. Support children by reflecting back what you see or hear, e.g., “Wow, when you got stuck, I noticed you asked a question.” “I noticed you paused and took a break. How did that strategy support you to continue playing with your partner?”
- Before beginning *Partner-Explore*, ask children to come up with a preliminary plan for how they will spend their time. (Try this later in the year, after children have had practice.) Plans might entail building a bridge, making a drawing, writing or acting out a story together, or other choices. Depending on the age of the children, invite them to use paper to plan their idea. For example, if children say they want to build a rocket ship in blocks, ask them to plan the steps they will take by drawing their idea or by discussing or making a list of the materials they need.
- Look for ways to highlight or integrate children’s problem-solving approaches into your community culture. For example, if, in response to a problem, a child exclaims, “I love a challenge!” bring her story and words to a whole group meeting and/or post them in the classroom. Such phrases can become a resource for the whole group, including teachers, when encountering a problem.
- *Partner-Explore* can be very challenging, especially for young children, so listen for conflict and find ways to support children to be in a state of “relaxed alertness.” Providing different kinds of sensory materials (sand trays, water trays, clay, etc.) can help young children feel grounded.
- A regular practice of observing, listening to, and recording children’s language and learning processes will support your ongoing development of *Partner-Explore*.
- Post selected excerpts from the documentation you collect from *Partner-Explore* in the classroom as a reference and reflection point for the community.

