

Time2Connect as a relationship building strategy for enhancing relationships with early elementary autistic students: Teacher Perspectives

A Smooth Sailing Research Brief by Noah Patzarian



Background:

Student-teacher relationships (STRs) can improve students' long-term school outcomes. However, autistic students in general education have fewer positive daily interactions with their teachers in relation to their peers. Additionally, in general education classrooms, teachers report having less time to interact with their autistic students than in special education settings, and feel less closeness compared to teachers in special education. Strategies to improve these STRs need to work in the general education setting.

What is Time2Connect?

Developed as a component of a larger professional development (PD) program, Smooth Sailing, Time2Connect (T2C) is a strategy to enhance STRs between general education early elementary teachers and their autistic students. T2C includes a brief (3-10 min) one-on-one interaction between autistic student and teacher during the school day 3-5 times a week. These interactions are child-led, non-directive, and communicate teachers' enthusiasm about students' interests - without relying on questions, directives, or delivering academic instructions to the student. Specific strategies for doing so are taught during the PD itself. Teachers show interest and engagement in the students activity (i.e: mirroring activity, matching students affect) and reduce pressure on students to engage in conversation. Additionally, teachers share enthusiasm with the student, providing descriptive commenting and following the student's lead

Key Results:

To gain an understanding of teachers' perspectives of T2C, researchers examined the survey responses of 27 early elementary general education teachers with an autistic student enrolled in the larger professional development program who completed a post-program survey. The findings are as follows

100%

of teachers found the concepts and skills learned for T2C helpful and effective

92.6%

of teachers said that T2C was helpful in getting to know their focal autistic student

96.3%

of teachers said they were likely to continue using T2C and would use it in the future with other students

What Teachers Reported:

- T2C sessions were “joyful” - students and teachers remembered and valued the time spent together

“I felt like they were genuine laughs and joy exuding from him, so it was a lot of fun.”

- Teachers gained a new understanding in finding ways to better engage their students in the classroom.

“I didn't know he really enjoyed cars. I didn't know he could draw so well.. So I feel like knowing there's something else that motivates him is really helpful.”

- Teachers reported developing an enhanced appreciation for their students' strengths and abilities

“It's almost like I can see how he works... even if he didn't verbalize, I could kind of surmise..”

- T2C led other students to have more interest in their autistic classmate, creating social opportunities.

Anecdote: when a teacher was having a conversation with the autistic student during T2C, other peers were listening and became interested in the topic. When they finished the T2C session, the peers picked up the conversation with the classmate

T2C has the potential to help teachers see and identify their autistic students' strengths in the classroom. Engaging in T2C sessions with autistic students could be one feasible and effective strategy for general education teachers to employ positive interactions with their early elementary autistic students

Sources:

Hughes, O., Vecsey, G., Eisenhower, A., Hamsho, N. & Blacher, J. (2026) Enhancing the relationships with autistic early elementary students: Teachers' perspectives on the Time2Connect relationship building strategy [Under review]. Department of Psychology, University of Massachusetts, Boston.

