



**inclusion  
matters!**

SECTION 12

# Peer Relationships

# Peer Relationships

## **Making Relationships a Priority by Paula Kluth (adapted)**

*This article is from the website by Dr. Paula Kluth. It, along with many others on inclusive schooling, differentiated instruction, and literacy can be found at [www.paulakluth.com](http://www.paulakluth.com) – Visit now to read her Tip of the Day, read dozens of free articles and learn more about supporting diverse learners in K-12 classroom.*

The opportunity to have real friends occurs through participation in family, school, neighborhoods, and other places where people gather. Real friendships are genuine caring relationships where people share common interests, love and respect each other, and want to spend time together. Contrary to the idea that these kinds of friendships can only happen naturally, our experience is that discovering and building real friendships often requires intentional or deliberate action. Friendships are central to this vision of inclusion. The power of friendship for belonging cannot be over-estimated. We know that friends and relationships are vital for self-esteem, dreams, participation, social support, and citizenship

## **Facilitating Friendships: Five Ideas**

Many students with disabilities—including those with significant disabilities—make friends during the secondary school years and sustain those friendships for years. We know this dream is possible. The goal, then, is to create a context that will make the dream a reality for a wider range of students. Five ways that schools can encourage interactions, build community, and facilitate relationships are offered here.

### **1) Make It a Priority**

It almost seems too simple to be true but when students with disabilities do have a robust network of friends it is often, in part, because they are supported by teachers who value and cultivate student collaboration and interaction. In other words, schools that succeed in bringing students together understand relationships as a priority and engage in practices that are related to that priority. In these schools, for examples, social interactions are prioritized on Individual Education Plans and considered in the development of lesson plans.

### **2) Build a School Community**

The development and sustenance of an inclusive school community involves strategies and practices that purposefully encourage and teach sharing, learning, interdependence, and respect. For example, teachers might encourage community through cooperative learning experiences, conflict resolution opportunities, play and games, class meetings, service learning, social-justice education, cross-age and same-age tutoring and mentoring, and school and classroom celebrations. Teachers can also cultivate community by working for whole-school change. For instance, by lobbying for smaller classes, challenging competitive school structures (e.g., cutting students from sports teams), and developing ways to connect students across classrooms and grade levels (e.g., in-school e-mail pals), teachers can not only strengthen the classroom community but help the school as a whole become more responsive to all learners.

### **3) Create Spaces for Sharing**

Teachers who seek information about students' experiences, dreams, interests, and needs can use this information to better educate their students and to facilitate relationships between learners. Too often (especially in secondary schools), students are educated in the same classrooms day after day without developing personal relationships. When I was observing one middle school classroom, I asked a young man to tell me the name of one of his classmates. "I don't know his name" the student replied. "I've

never talked to him". I later found out that these two students had been in the same classroom for over two months! Students' voices must be central to work in the classroom and time must be carved out for communication and idea sharing. Teachers interested in incorporating students voices might begin by increasing forums for student participation and leadership. For instance, students might be asked to lead weekly class meetings or to mentor one another. Teachers might also consider implementing collaborative learning activities in which students rely on one another to complete a project or task.

#### **4) Look to Peers to Teach and Support**

Peer support is an essential part of inclusive schooling for students with and without disabilities. Although the support of peers can occur naturally with no adult facilitation, strategies have also been identified that teach all students how to support one another in academic & social environments. It is important that educators provide appropriate opportunities and facilitation to foster, not impede peer supports in schools. Structured or facilitated peer supports are arrangements, strategies, and activities that involve groups of students with varying abilities working together to provide ongoing social and academic support to one another with facilitation from an adult. In some cases, students succeed when teachers cannot. Often, peers will learn quite naturally how to support a friend with disabilities. They will know how to calm, how to teach, and how to encourage a classmate without any direction or interference from adults. In addition, peers are valuable resources because they tend to understand each other in ways authority figures or adults do not. Even the best teachers lack the same degree of intimacy with students that students share with each other. Students know each other's secrets and their fears. They often recognize each other's needs and gifts in ways that adults do not. Peers are often the constants in a child's education career. While teachers are fluid, often changing from year to year, peers are constant often traveling together through their school careers until graduation. It is important to highlight the support that peers can offer each other, as this is their future community as an adult. This type of help and mutual support is great preparation for adult life for all participants. In any peer support model, however, it is critical that teachers seek opportunities to give all students opportunities to both give and receive help and support. Relationships where some individuals are always helped while others are always helping are neither natural nor particularly useful in building a classroom community. It is a teacher's job, therefore, to cultivate a classroom culture that allows all students to give assistance and receive assistance and take on leadership roles.

#### **5) Provide Opportunities for Social Connection Beyond Classroom**

In order to support the development of relationships in the classroom, teachers may need to help students find social opportunities outside of the classroom. Extracurricular activities with all of the related fun, camaraderie, and socializing can offer some of the richest opportunities for relationship building students are likely to have during their school years. While some schools offer activities to meet the needs of all students, other schools need to develop a wider array of activities so that every learner can find an extra-curricular home. Some schools, for instance, are moving beyond the traditional sports-based and arts-based extra-curricular options and offering clubs and activities related to academic content (e.g., chess club), political issues (e.g., conservation groups), and social support (e.g., anti-drug groups). All schools must be conscientious about offering options that will interest and engage a range of students in the school (Sapon-Shevin & Kluth, 2003). This means questioning whether or not all students can afford certain clubs or sports; whether meeting times are convenient for students who may have after-school responsibilities; and whether students can get the appropriate supports they need to participate in after-school activities. If a student with a disability, for instance, needs personal support to

participate in activities, teachers must brainstorm ways to provide this. Schools may try to provide natural supports by structuring the activities in creative ways or they may ask paraprofessionals or teachers to provide this support or look to student or adult volunteers.

## Conclusions

When most of us look back on our high school days, our relationships dominate our memories. This memory making is possible for all learners if ideas such as the ones in this article are employed. It may not always be easy to attend to the social needs of learners, but effective teachers will keep in mind that schooling is more than the three “Rs” of “reading, ‘riting, and ‘rithmetic”. The fourth “R”, “relationship building”, is critical too.

### Three Areas Where Friendship Development Can Be Identified in the Classroom

1. Ability awareness involves recognizing that individuals with disabilities are people first with unique gifts, talents, and abilities. Thus, when a child is being included it is important to present him/her as a person who is more alike classmates than different. This can be accomplished by:
  - a. Highlighting common interests — point out the interests/likes the child has that are typical for that age group. A picture book of the child doing things with family and friends may be a helpful introduction.
  - b. Infuse specific awareness activities into the curriculum, for example, teach about sensory disabilities as part of science unit or teach about likeness and differences among people in social studies.
2. Developing peer connections/friendships involves bringing students together through structured activities that promote social interaction.

Using community building activities that enable students to get to know each other. Examples of community building activities could include playing cooperative games, interviewing and introducing a classmate, and completing a group project with one product such as a class mural. Two other activities that teachers have found particularly helpful in building connections are:

- a. What’s in the sack? Each student brings five objects from home that tell something about herself/himself. The students show their objects and explain why they are important to them.
- b. Classroom yellow pages. Each student fills out a yellow sheet listing his/her hobbies and the things they are “experts” at doing. The pages are put into a yellow folder and students can browse through the classroom “yellow pages” and find out similar interests.
- c. Modeling appropriate interaction and communication so that the other students see the child as a member of the class and know how to communicate and interact with their peer.
- d. Involving everyone in the life of the classroom by making sure the student with a disability is involved in all of the activities and routines of the classroom. The student may need a partner or partially participate, but should be included in jobs, student of the week, displaying of best work, etc.
- e. Set up a program, i.e. Circle of Friends, to enlist peers as supports/acquaintances for a student who is not connected.

3. Peer collaboration for learning involves including students as part of instruction through activities such as:
  - a. Partner learning through peer tutors, job partners, etc.
  - b. Cooperative learning or other group activities.
  - c. Peers as part of the instructional team participating in planning transitions, determining adaptations, and problem-solving. For example, some inclusive classrooms have a “lunch bunch” to involve peers in planning adaptations. A small group of students meets at lunch time with the teacher to help plan adaptations for the student with a disability.

## Circle of Friends

<http://www.circleofriends.org/>

Circle of Friends, an inclusion program for all students with disabilities, brings the understanding and acceptance of differences on school campuses and within the community, decreasing bullying and making a significant social impact. During the early childhood and primary years it is usually possible to allow budding relationships to develop on their own with the use of the informal activities listed above. As the teachers in these grades introduce students to each other and the school community, a student with disabilities will usually connect with others with minimal facilitation.

However, as students reach the third and fourth grade relationships are often established and students may have questions about differences. It may be difficult for a new student to join a classroom or school community, and if that student has a disability which is not familiar to others; initial interactions may be difficult. In order to facilitate interaction a formalized circle may be developed.

An adult facilitator is necessary to initiate the process and keep the group organized and focused. An initial meeting is held with the student’s class, homeroom, lunch group, or any other group that the student interacts with on a regular basis. The meeting begins with an awareness lesson about the student’s disability. Often an experiential activity will be incorporated into the lesson so students can have an experience of what the disability might look like or feel like for the student with the disability. The awareness lesson is an important piece to develop empathy with fellow students. The awareness lesson may or may not name the student, depending on the wishes of the student and the family. Sometimes family members lead the awareness lesson, again depending on the desires of the student and family. After the awareness lesson, the peer group is invited to participate in an exercise to look at the circles of friends in their own lives. The facilitator gives each student a sheet of paper with four concentric circles or asks them to draw the circles on a sheet of paper.

Next, the facilitator models and describes the following steps as the peers fill in their own circles:

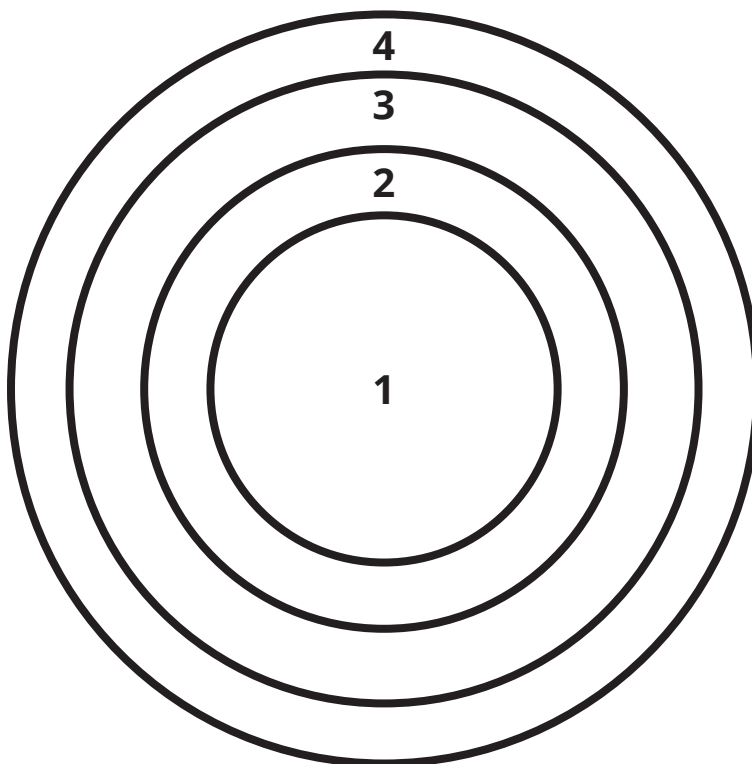
1. In the inner circle write the names of the people you live with or who are very close to you.
2. In the next circle, write the names of your friends. Think about those people with whom you like to do things, call on the phone, etc.
3. In the next circle, put the groups of people you see regularly who your acquaintances are. This may include classmates, sports teams, clubs, church groups, etc.
4. In the fourth circle, put people who are paid to be in your life. This would include doctor, dentist, teacher, principal, etc.

After circles are completed, the facilitator asks the peers to look at their circles and to notice the different relationships in their lives. Then, the facilitator shows the peers an example of the circles for a student with a disability that often contains few, if any, friends and acquaintances. Again, the student may or may not be named, depending on the wishes of the student and family. The facilitator asks them what they think about this circle and how they might feel if their circles were empty of friends and acquaintances. The circles are a powerful representation of the need to help a person connect with others

Now, the facilitator asks the peers to problem solve: "How can we help this person connect with others?" "What would you want other people to do for you if you were the 'new kid' at a school?" At this time school staff might suggest a lunch group or other group (if it is not mentioned by students), to give the student with a disability the opportunity to meet regularly with peers for friendship activities, such as playing games together. If the group agrees on such a group, volunteers are recruited and a meeting time and place is established. The "Circle of Friends" group meets regularly so that the student can enjoy fun with peers and establish some friendship connections.

The facilitator may suggest that the group reconvene to assess the Circle of Friends group progression. The facilitator may then broaden the group's mission by saying that others may be having difficulty with relationships among peers and asking how this group could be a support for all. Thus, the group's focus could move beyond the student with disabilities while still supporting him/her.

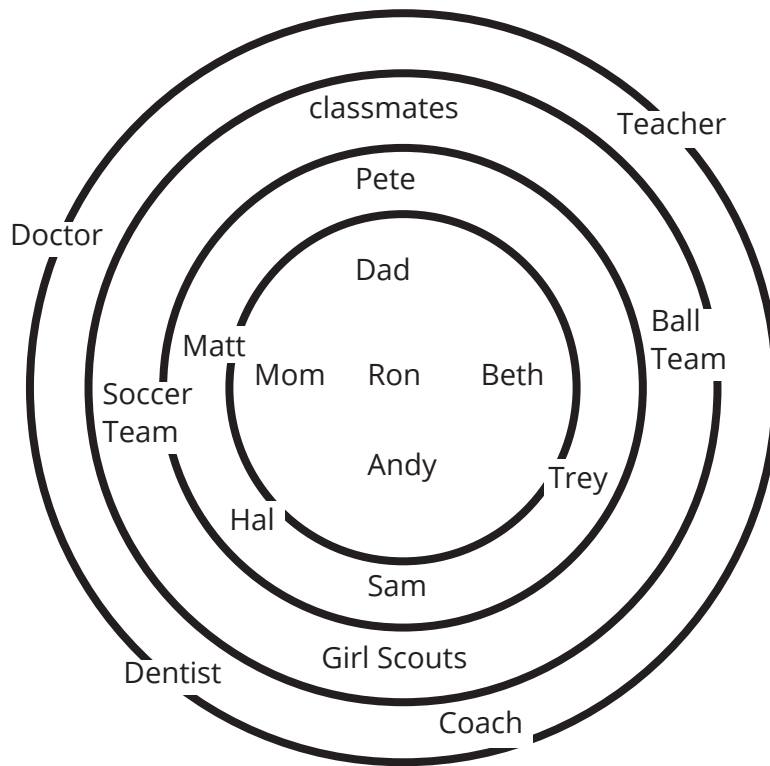
### CIRCLE OF FRIENDS



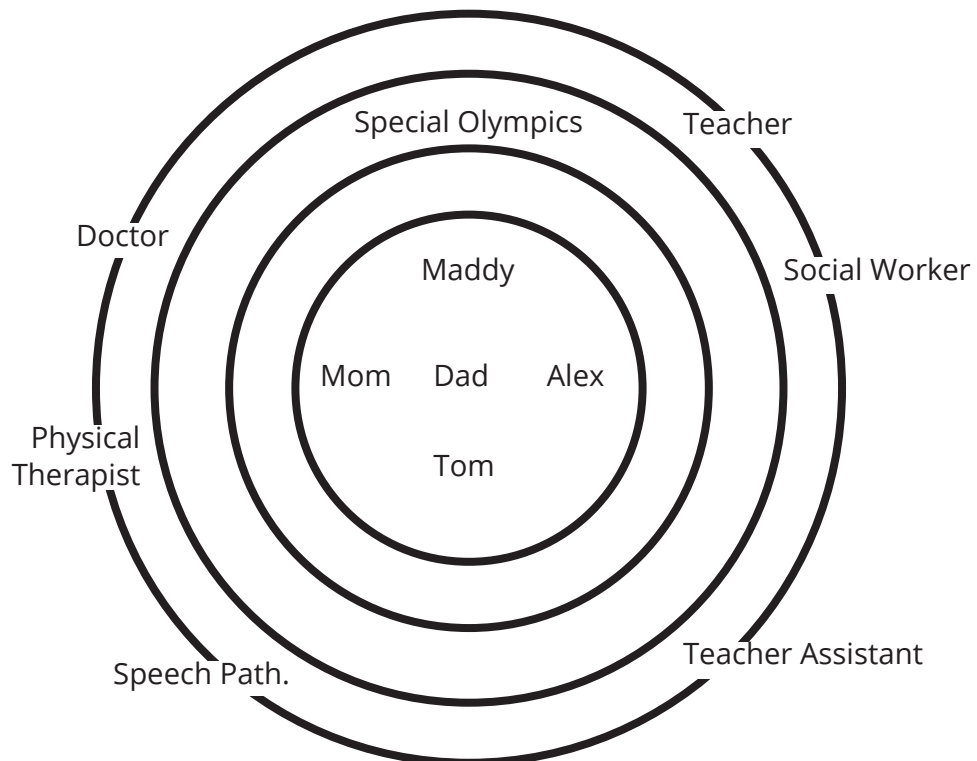
**Circle 1:** Family • **Circle 2:** Close Friends • **Circle 3:** Acquaintances • **Circle 4:** Paid Relationship

## CIRCLE OF FRIENDS: TYPICAL EXAMPLES

Example for a student without a disability:



Example for a student with a disability:



# Peer Relationships

## Friendship Development Tools, Resources, Websites.

Special School District's Family and Community Resource Center has a large variety of books, DVDs, packets and trainings related to developing Friendship and social skills. For more information, please visit [http://www.ssdmo.org/cool\\_tools/fcrc.html](http://www.ssdmo.org/cool_tools/fcrc.html)

## Information on Friendship Programs:

**Best Buddies** - <http://www.bestbuddies.org/our-programs>

## \*School Based Programs Being Implemented in St. Louis County

CUBS - Celebrating Unique and Bright Kids: Rockwood – Kellison Elementary

Expanding Our Circle: Ladue – Ladue M.S.

Peer Buddies: Hazelwood West H.S. Where students receiving SSD services join with other students to cheer together at school sporting events. They get together before games to socialize, eat pizza and make posters that support their team. During the game, they sit together in the stands to make up a special cheering section among the fans. Although they might not realize it, members of Peer Buddies are forming valuable social skills through their interactions

\*Other programs that have been implemented throughout St. Louis County include after school Friendship groups, service groups, before school or lunch groups.

## Websites for Social Skills and Friendship:

Carol Gray's website on social stories and more. Most things are for sale, but many can be borrowed from SSD's Family & Community Resource Center - <http://www.thegraycenter.org/>

Michelle Garcia Winner's website. It has several good articles. Many of her materials can be

borrowed from SSD's Family & Community Resource Center - <http://www.socialthinking.com/>

Behavior Stories: The Watson Institute, free, appealing, editable and printable stories - <http://www.thewatsoninstitute.org/teacher-resources2.jsp?pagelid=2161392240601226415747290>

Behavior Management: Getting to the Bottom of Social Skills Deficits - <http://www.ldonline.org/article/6165>

Several articles on social skills by Rick Lavoie - <http://www.ricklavoie.com/articles.html>

When Your Child Has Trouble (relating to peers)- <http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=1464>

## Websites:

<http://autismsocialskills.com/>

Teaching Social Skills to Kids Who Don't Yet Have Them - <http://www.ldonline.org/article/14545/>

Teach Social Skills - <http://www.pbisworld.com/tier-1/teach-social-skills/>

Social Skills for Middle School Students - <http://www.cccoe.net/social/skillslist.htm>

Social Skills Activities - <http://www.education.com/activity/social-skills/>

It's My Life: <http://pbskids.org/itsmylife/friends/index.html>

Nick Jr. Social/Emotional Games: [http://www.nickjr.com/ni-hao-kai-lan/social-emotional-learning\\_ap.html](http://www.nickjr.com/ni-hao-kai-lan/social-emotional-learning_ap.html)

Whiz Kids Games: <http://www.whizkidgames.com>

Do2Learn – The Feelings Game: <http://www.do2learn.com/games/feelingsgame/index.htm>

Student Activities to Learn Social Skills: <http://www.cccoe.net/social/SAdirectory.htm>

For additional information on Friendship and Inclusion, please visit the Inclusive Education page on the SSD website.



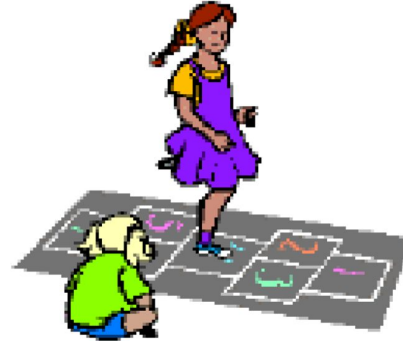
## The Importance of Friendship for School-Age Children<sup>1</sup>

Millie Ferrer-Chancy and Anne Fugate<sup>2</sup>

Friends are vital to school-age children's healthy development. Research has found that children who lack friends can suffer from emotional and mental difficulties later in life. Friendships provide children with more than just fun playmates. Friendships help children develop emotionally and morally. In interacting with friends, children learn many social skills, such as how to communicate, cooperate, and solve problems. They practice controlling their emotions and responding to the emotions of others. They develop the ability to think through and negotiate different situations that arise in their relationships. Having friends even affects children's school performance. Children tend to have better attitudes about school and learning when they have friends there. In short, children benefit greatly from having friends.

### **What parents can do to help child make friends**

Parents play a crucial role in their child's social development. A child is not born with social skills. He needs parents who take an active role in preparing him to interact successfully with his peers. The most important thing parents can do for their child is to develop a loving, accepting, and respectful



relationship with him. This warm relationship sets the stage for all future relationships, including friendships. It helps the child develop the basic trust and self-confidence necessary to go out and meet others. It provides a firm foundation on which the child can develop social skills.

Parents also teach their child various social skills by being a good role model. That is, a child learns from how his parents interact with him and other people. He learns how to meet people and talk to them, to tell stories and jokes, and to cooperate with others and ask for favors. He learns how to win or lose well, to apologize and accept apologies. He learns to accept compliments graciously and to show admiration and appreciation. Furthermore, he learns to be patient, respectful, and considerate. Parents help

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1. This document is FCS2207, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Gainesville FL 32611. First published December 2002. Reviewed February 2007 by Heidi Radunovich, assistant professor, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences. Please visit the EDIS Web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.
  2. Millie Ferrer-Chancy, Ph.D., professor, Anne Fugate, former coordinator Educational/Training Programs, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, 32611.

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their child learn how to be a person others like to be around by showing him with their own actions.

You can do a great deal to prepare your child to make friends by maintaining a warm relationship with him and being a good role model. Below are some additional ways you can help prepare your child.

**Provide your child with opportunities to spend time with other children.** You can provide these opportunities in a number of ways. For example, you can invite other children to your house to play or let your child participate in clubs, classes, or teams. Older children may want to talk with their friends on the phone, in chat rooms on the internet, or through instant messaging. Set rules for using these methods of communication with your child and let him talk to his friends.



**Help your child learn games and sports.** Being able to play games and sports tends to be important for school-age children. Children do not have to be a superstar at a game or sport, but it is easier to join in and have fun if they know the rules and have the basic skills. Find out what game or sport your child is interested in and help her learn it. Do not pressure your child to play anything she does not want to. The pressure will only make her feel inferior. Make sure not to let the practice become a drill or drudgery. Be encouraging and focus on the fun of playing together.

**Set clear rules for appropriate behavior.** A child learns social skills in part through family rules about how to treat others. For example, a child might learn to ask before borrowing something or to solve a problem without hitting. Involve your child in setting family rules. If he is involved, he will not only be more likely to follow them, but he will also better understand the reasons for the rules and the standards for appropriate behavior.

When you need to discipline your child, remember that he will imitate your actions. How you treat him when he breaks a rule will influence how he responds to others. Avoid being harsh and punitive. Instead, be firm, kind, and respectful when you express your expectations of him.

**Teach your child how to handle different social situations.** You began this process when your child was a toddler. For example, you began to teach your toddler how to share and how to say please and thank you. Continue coaching your child as she grows older and encounters more social situations. If your child will be encountering a new or difficult situation, talk to her about it beforehand. For example, your child has been invited to a birthday party, but she is not sure if she wants to go. First listen to her concerns. Acknowledge her feelings without judging them. For example, say, "It sounds like you feel scared about being around kids you don't know." Then help your child brainstorm ideas about how to handle the situation. She might want to practice what to say to the birthday child when she arrives or to invite another guest over to get to know her better before the party.

**Talk with your child.** Spend some time every day talking with your child. This time is not for giving instructions or lecturing, but just for talking about the day's events or things that interest both of you. When your child is talking, make sure you are listening. For example, make eye contact, nod, and ask him questions to encourage him to elaborate on what he is saying. Talking with your child will not only help you keep up with him, but it will also let him practice the very important social skill of holding a conversation.

**Help your child learn to see others' points of view.** Around the age of six or seven, children are more able to understand others' feelings and points of view. Help your child develop this ability by talking about different situations. For example, when reading with your child, stop and ask how a character is feeling and why he does certain things. Or when your child tells you about situation at school, ask how she thinks the people felt and why they acted as they did.



**Help your child learn to manage negative feelings and solve problems.** Being able to manage negative feelings and work out problems are important skills in getting along with others. When your child talks about how he is feeling, listen. Show you are listening by reflecting what he says. For example, say, "It sounds like you're mad at Jamie." Then, gently coach your child in problem solving. First, help your child identify the situation. For example, say, "It sounds like you're upset because Jamie didn't include you in the game." Then help him brainstorm solutions to the situation. Talk about the solutions he comes up with and have him pick one.

If you overhear your child and his friend having a conflict, let them work it out on their own. Only step in if it is really necessary: if, for example, an argument is getting physical.

Do not sweat the small stuff. Fitting in with friends is very important to school-age children (and becomes increasingly important as children near adolescence). Recognize how important it is to your child. She and her friends may do things that seem silly to you. For example, you may not like how children this age like to dress. However, if your child's behavior is not dangerous or offensive, do not sweat the small stuff.

## Conclusion

If you are concerned about your child making enough friends, stop to consider whether he just has a different social style than you do. For example, your child may prefer one or two close friends rather than a wide circle of friends. One style is not better

than another. What matters is that your child is comfortable and happy with his friends. If it seems

that your child has no friends, talk to your child's teacher, school or family counselor, or pediatrician for additional guidance and resources.

As a parent, you play a crucial role in your child's social development. You cannot make friends for your child, but your love, patience, and support make it possible for your child to meet new people and make friends on her own. Friendships are very important to a school-age child. They help a child grow. They help her develop the self-confidence and social skills she will need as an adult.

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## FRIENDSHIPS / EDUCATION

# Special at school but lonely at home: An alternative friendship group for adolescents with Down syndrome

Jeanne D'Haem

Friends play a significant role in mental and physical health; however, individuals with Down syndrome and other developmental disabilities, even those who are included in general education programmes, have not developed friendships as hoped. After a decade of inclusion and structured school programmes to facilitate friendships, many parents report that peer relationships end after school hours. This study compared the efficacy of school based friendship groups with a mixed age home based group. Specific methods to establish a successful friendship group are discussed. This study followed three friendship groups for five years. Two groups of six to eight general education students met with the target student twice a month during the school day; one group of mixed age participants met in the student's home. A counsellor facilitated all the groups. Parent and student concerns regarding friendships were informally assessed with interviews and observations. Observations and interviews confirmed that although peer interactions during school occurred they did not continue after school. Of the three students studied, only one had a relationship with a same-aged peer after four years of school facilitated groups. Two students had significant feelings of depression during high school. One student entered counselling. The home-based mixed age friendship group did result in significant friendships. The individual participated in two or three activities each month with friends from the group. School based friendship groups of adolescent peers were not successful in developing friendships for individuals with Down syndrome. When a multi-age group was conducted outside of the school, friendships formed and have continued for over two years. This article describes how and why parents and professionals should look beyond school based same age peer friendship groups and consider a community circle of mixed-age friends.

*"Friends don't have to be our age - friends are people who like you."*

Making friends is one of the most intractable problems for children with significant special needs - some do not have a single person who is their friend. Many research studies<sup>[1-4]</sup> have found that friends play a significant role in mental and physical health; however, developing friendships remains a problem for those with Down syndrome and other developmental disabilities. Peer relations are a critical aspect of a child's life<sup>[5]</sup>. Most importantly, in order for individuals with developmental disabilities to live independent and full lives, friends in the community are critical. The possibility of community friend-

ships has been a major impetus for the full inclusion of individuals with severe disabilities in local public schools. However, according to Myra Madnick, the former Executive Director of the National Down Syndrome Society in New York, "Despite all of the gains individuals with Down syndrome have made, loneliness is a major problem." Although students who are included have made great strides in language, behavior, social development and academics this is not true for social inclusion<sup>[6]</sup>.

Many schools have established Circle of Friends groups in order to facilitate social acceptance and friendships for children with disabilities; however, in this study of five years of group meetings,

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## PRACTICE

relationships did not continue outside of school. This study followed two students with Down syndrome and one with other developmental disabilities for five years. The students attended a mixture of general and special education classes at their local public schools. Three Circle of Friends groups were established in elementary or middle school to facilitate friendships for each student. Six same-age peers from the general population met with the target student twice a month during the school year. A social worker, guidance counsellor, or school psychologist facilitated the groups. Although acceptance during the school day was excellent, peer relationships did not continue outside of the structured school day. Of the three students studied, only one had a relationship with a peer after four years of facilitated groups. Friendships are especially important during secondary school as they provide support previously given by parents<sup>[7,11]</sup>; however, the structured friendship groups established for the students in this study had to be discontinued during secondary school. All three groups were disbanded in the upper grades due to difficulties in getting peers to participate.

Once the target student entered secondary school friendship groups could not be scheduled during the school day. Teachers were not willing to release students from their classes so they could attend friendship group sessions and students were also concerned about missing instruction. Although many students reported continued interest in the project and were willing to meet with the target students they were not interested in meeting during lunch. These secondary students do not have free periods during the day and most were active in sports and clubs after school. After several months of attempts to schedule a mutually beneficial time to meet the in-school friendship group meetings had to be abandoned.

Older students may not be interested in structured peer-support programmes for students with developmental disabilities because they are teacher directed<sup>[8]</sup>. Intervention has been found to be more successful when peer ownership, and problem solving were emphasised over teacher-mediated strategies<sup>[9,10,12,13]</sup>. For one of the students in this study, the group facilitator attempted to mediate informal meetings between the target student and peers from the secondary school for after school meetings at a local teashop; however these were also unsuccessful and did not occur.

*"Nobody ever wants to hang out with me because I have Down syndrome." Alice, age 17*

Alice was a secondary school student with Down syndrome. The efforts to establish a circle of friends in the secondary school failed for her and



**Making friends is one of the most intractable problems for children with significant special needs.**

her mother reported, "I'm worried about Alice. At the dinner table everyone talked about his or her weekend plans. My husband and I are having dinner with another couple on Saturday night, and Brittany is going to the mall with her girlfriends, Scarlett and Ally. I happened to glance over at Alice and her head was practically on the table."

When asked what was wrong, Alice whispered, "Nobody ever wants to hang out with me because I have Down syndrome."

Alice had been in general education classes since first grade. Her parents did not want her

### Box 1 | Community Circle of Friends

- Information about a Circle of Friends is available on the web. Some excellent sites include: [www.inclusive-solutions.com](http://www.inclusive-solutions.com), [www.ECAC-parentcenter.org](http://www.ECAC-parentcenter.org), [www.udel.edu](http://www.udel.edu)
- Make sure that the student would like to start a circle - not everyone is interested in being the centre of attention. The key to a successful Circle of Friends is the student's and the friend's ownership of the experience.
- Meet with the student's parents and explain the programme. Offer to facilitate the first few meetings.
- Ask your student to list people he or she likes in the family, the neighbourhood or at school (or work), both adults and kids. We are close to people who share our ideas and interests regardless of age. Many young people with handicaps actually prefer the company of adults – respect this.
- The special and general education teachers may have names of students who would like to be included.
- See if there is anyone who would be good at running the meeting if you are not comfortable doing so. Many people are used to a leadership role at work or in volunteer positions.

**Box 2 | Steps to start a Community Circle of Friends**

1. Send out invitations or make some phone calls.
2. Two hours is a good amount of time.
3. Have the meeting in a private home, the church basement, or a local pizza parlour.
4. The special education teacher should help the student draw up a list of things they like to do. Parents should add to the list and help the student to practise saying it.
5. The student should practise greetings, hanging up coats and offering refreshments. Begin this in class and ask the parent to practise the same routine at home so the student responds to the doorbell, is comfortable opening the door and hanging up coats and knows how to hand someone food and drink.

to be placed in a separate class or school for children with cognitive impairments. They wanted her to be accepted by people in the community where she lives. Teachers attended training sessions, an instructional aide was hired and Alice quickly learned to hang up her coat and sit on the rug for the morning circle.

Alice attended a public secondary school. She took some general classes with the assistance of an instructional aide who modified assignments for her. She had reading and maths classes in special education with students who have learning disabilities. She went from class to class on her own, opened her locker, changed for gym and bought lunch in the cafeteria. She helped to manage the field hockey team and danced in the school play. Her high school teachers reported that she pays attention in class and does every scrap of homework.

No one stared at or teased Alice, it was clear that she was accepted at the secondary school - but she did not have a single friend. She came to the homecoming dance and a few girls said hello but it was painful to watch her standing alone listening to the music. The secondary students

were kind and protective, but they did not call to chat on the phone or invite her to hang out at the mall.

*When the school bus dropped her off at home, Alice got off the social circuit as well.*

During Alice's intermediate school years, her special education case manager organised a Circle of Friends at school. Student volunteers were released from class to meet with Alice and her social worker. The girls got to know Alice and helped her with her locker and greeted her in the hall. The volunteers were selected so she had a friend in every class. They had in-school parties for her birthday and Alice sat with them at lunch. When she entered high school a circle of friends was difficult to schedule because students could not miss classes. Student leaders were asked to get involved with Alice informally. They were eager to help during school, but no one called Alice to see a movie or asked for her e-mail address.

When the bus dropped her off at home, Alice got off the social circuit as well.

The inclusion programme worked for Alice within the structure of the school day. She acted like a high school student; she dressed like a typical teen and was liked by the other students. Although Alice had a normal school day she was lonely and unhappy at home.

*From the invitation to the community circle:*

*Alice understands that to live independently she will need the support of people in the community, her friends, her parents, siblings and other relatives. The hope with inclusion is to foster these relationships now so the supports are in place later. Alice also needs to learn how to initiate and maintain friendships.*

Since a major goal of the friendship programme had not been met, the in-school friendship groups were reconsidered. Interest in the formal friendship circles declined in secondary school and the target students did not develop sustained friendships with peers. Two students reported feelings of unhappiness and parents reported concerns about depression. One family sought counselling for their daughter. Attempts to nurture a more student directed, less professionally facilitated programme for Alice also failed.

An inclusion specialist from the New Jersey State Department of Education, Peggy Thorpe, suggested moving the Circle of Friends out of the school and into the community. Thorpe suggested that one issue might be the idea that friends must be the same age as the target student. She pointed out that friends don't have to be our age - friends are people who like you. We also wondered if peer participation would increase with more control of the interventions by the participants instead of a facilitator<sup>[8,9]</sup>. Although the secondary school

**Box 3 | The Meetings**

1. The student greets everyone, takes their coat and offers refreshments.
2. The facilitator will go around the room and ask everyone to introduce themselves and tell how they know the student.
3. Ask the student to talk about his or her interests. It is critical to allow the student to express their own interests; they must be respected.
4. Ask the circle members to talk about what they have been doing and any interests or hobbies they have. Look for connections between what the circle members like to do and what the student likes to do.
5. If people would like to set up some activities that should happen naturally. No one should feel forced to do something.
6. Always allow the student to agree, delay, or decline an offer to do something. They must be in control.
7. Choose a date for the next meeting usually no more than every other month.
8. The student may want to cook dinner, rent a video, or celebrate birthdays at the following meetings.

## PRACTICE

students always indicated that they were interested in friendships with students with Down syndrome, they avoided teacher directed interventions or suggestions from counsellors about what they should do to assist the student with Down syndrome. The intervention team wondered if students would respond to a mixed age group where they would be equal participants in problem solving along with the adults.

Alice's parents liked the idea and were willing to try. In order to establish a community circle, Alice and her mother compiled a list of the people, young and old, neighbours and relatives, church members and business associates, whom Alice liked (see BOX 1). Alice and her mother decided to have the circle meet at their home instead of at the school. They composed an invitation for the first meeting. This paragraph was in the invitation:

*Alice understands that to live independently she will need the support of people in the community, her friends, her parents, siblings and other relatives. The hope with inclusion is to foster these relationships now so the supports are in place later. Alice also needs to learn how to initiate and maintain friendships.*

Ten people were present at the first Community Circle meeting. Participants included Alice's parents, her sister and her two best friends, an aunt, a friend from school, the youth pastor from her church, a family friend from her father's business, and me. Alice greeted everyone at the door and helped to serve pizza and soft drinks (see BOX 2).

The inclusion specialist had agreed to facilitate the first few meetings. She asked everyone in the circle to introduce themselves and tell how they knew Alice. The group talked about friends and the adults and young adults developed a definition.

*A friend is someone who:*

- you feel comfortable telling your secrets
- you go places and do things with
- enjoys the same things as you do
- notices when you are not feeling right

The facilitator asked everyone to share things they liked to do. Scott is active at the local firehouse, Scarlett likes to figure skate, watch movies and dance. Alice likes to eat out, watch movies and figure skate.

Alice shared her dreams and how she hopes to accomplish them. She would like to work with children someday and live near her parents. She wants to do more volunteering in the community, perhaps through the church. As the group shared their interests and Alice talked about her goals, connections began to emerge. The youth



**In order for individuals with developmental disabilities to live independent and full lives, friends in the community are critical.**

minister asked Alice to attend a church volunteer project. One of the girls asked Alice to her house to get dressed for the junior prom. Alice's sister took notes.

Alice wrote about her Community Circle:

*There is a Community Circle of Friends that I started with some help from my mother and Dr. D'Haem. We started by deciding on a place to have it. My mother and I decided to have it at my home. I invited friends from church, school and the community. The first thing we do in the circle is to go around the room and tell what we have done in the last month or two. I either make dinner or order the food. The next thing that we do is to think about and make goals for me. I feel that the community circle is good for me. I go out with my friends, go to a movie, or go over to someone's house and have fun. I feel I have friends that want to get to know me. To tell you the truth, I love having a circle of friends. It is a way for us to get to know and trust each other. To sum it up, if people don't want to get to know me - that is too bad. They will miss out on knowing a great interesting girl.*

The Community Circle of Friends met every other month for almost two years. Alice learned how to send out invitations and cooked dinner for one meeting. She knows how to invite someone over who has shown an interest in her. She knows how to greet friends at the door and make them feel welcome (see BOX 3).

Alice no longer needs a formal Community Circle of Friends. Scarlett e-mails from college at least once a week and they always make plans to do something together when she comes home for a holiday. Alice and her aunt take a yoga class together. She remains active in volunteer projects at her church and spent a week in Maine helping to fix up a house with a church group.

Community Circles were suggested to two

other students with developmental disabilities when they entered high school. One student attended Alice's Circle meeting with her mother. Although her parents were very interested in the concept, the student did not want to participate. At this point she felt content with the activities and relationships offered by her family. The other student's parents felt that their child would form friendships after high school in the work environment.

## Conclusion

The important goal in a Community Circle of Friends is that all parties gain something from the friendship. Secondary students may not be

interested in participation in adult led friendship groups. They may however, be active participants in mixed age groups where they are full members with adults. The community-centred group is a good transition to the adult world where friends are not people who are the same age, but people with similar interests. Individuals with Down syndrome and other developmental disabilities have a lot to offer in their own unique way. Community Circles for the other two students in this study might have been successful if a transition programme had been in place from the beginning of the friendship circles, in school groups for primary and intermediate school and a community based group during secondary school.

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## Best Buddies

Below are some quick facts about Best Buddies history, mission, international growth, and developments in the UK.

- Best Buddies® is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organisation dedicated to enhancing the lives of people with intellectual disabilities by providing opportunities for one-to-one friendships and integrated employment.
- Founded in 1989 by Anthony K. Shriver, Best Buddies is a vibrant, international organisation that has grown from one original chapter at Georgetown University to more than 1,200 middle school, high school, and college campuses across the country and internationally. We impact the lives of 300,000 people each year.
- The organisation is active in each of the 50 United States, and operates accredited international programs in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Egypt, England, Germany, Ghana, Honduras, Hong Kong, Ireland, Israel, Kenya, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Panama, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Scotland, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Tanzania, Thailand, and the United Arab Emirates – with additional country programmes in advanced phases of development. By 2010, Best Buddies will continue to build on its successful volunteer base in all 50 States, further expand its accredited international programmes to 50 countries and annually engage more than 500,000 people worldwide.

- We have six programmes: Best Buddies Middle Schools, Best Buddies High Schools, Best Buddies Colleges, Best Buddies Jobs, Citizens, and e-Buddies. Student/Citizen volunteers are matched with 'Buddies,' individuals with intellectual disabilities.

### UK Developments:

- Best Buddies Scotland enjoys an exciting partnership with Enable Scotland. Two university chapters exist, at The University of Glasgow (1st year programme), and The University of Stirling (3rd year programme). Contact Lena Gillies, lena.gillies@enable.org.uk.
- Best Buddies England is in partnership with Mencap and is in the development stages. School programmes with matched volunteers will launch in Autumn 2007.

For more information on international programmes, or developments in the UK, please contact Valerie Vitale, International Programs Director, at ValerieVitale@bestbuddies.org

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