

# Encourage Friendships for Children with Disabilities

Research shows that friendships give people with disabilities social, emotional, and practical supports and integrate them into community life. People with disabilities also bring their own gifts, such as acceptance, spontaneity, trust, simple enjoyment of life's pleasures, honesty and several other contributions to their friends.

To facilitate friendships, you must be open to friendship development, flexible, and persevering. Orient toward the child's strengths and allow the child to make his or her own choices, because the ability to make respected choices develops independence.

With younger children, you might have to teach the child how to interact with his or her peers in play. You will also need to educate peers. Start by discussing the child's disability with playmates. Ask for questions. This encourages tolerance and understanding of individual differences. If the child has a communication disability, tell playmates ways to communicate with the child with a disability.

Studies indicate that group size influences social play of children with disabilities. Two or three children play better with a child with a disability than larger groups. Another tip is to vary the children in the group. More sophisticated children will be role models and have better communication skills. Less sophisticated children allow the child with a disability to exhibit more leadership and problem solving. Play activity also acts in connections. Some toys (balls or board games) promote play with other children. Toys (such as books or crayons) encourage solitary play. Organize materials to promote interaction and have them in a defined area with sufficient space to play. Barbra Wolfe, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, who gives workshops on fostering young children's friendships, suggests games that allow children with disabilities to help children interact.

For instance, Show Mix-Up, where children take off one shoe and close their eyes, while an adult hides the shoe and then tells children to search for the missing shoe, is one such game. If the child with a disability is unable to physically get his or her shoe, a peer will gladly help look for the missing shoe.

With older children, research shows that peer tutoring, cooperative learning, disability awareness training help children with and without disabilities to socialise, play, and just hang out. Successful strategies are:

1. One-to-one matching. Here, in a formal volunteer program (such as Best Buddies, Natural Ties), a similar-aged peer, often as an academic course requirement, is matched with a similar-aged peer who has a disability. Many long-lasting friendships emerge from these matches.
2. Existing or formal networks. In the McGill Action Planning System (MAPS), the child and family are asked to look closely at their environment and plan for a better life by examining the child's current relationships and coming up with ways to expand and improve those connections. A related method is Group Action Planning, which brings together family, friends, and community members to regularly problem solve for and with the child with a disability. For those who have few or no relationships, Circle of Friends is a method where peers are invited to make a commitment to a child with a disability. Often, this is done in the school setting and can be part of an existing or new club. Promoted to students as an extra-curricular activity, this "friendship club" should allow members to choose the relationship they want to develop and make sure the child with a disability is regarded as a peer at all times.
3. Community activities, Many places in the community actively encourage people with disabilities to participate in their programs. These include Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), Boy and Girl Scouts of America, 4-H (which offers more than just agricultural offerings), park and recreation programs, community theatre groups, and volunteer organizations.
4. Consciousness raising advocacy. This approach where one person or a group goes into the community to discuss disability issues often leads to friendships.

### **Winning strategies**

- Find opportunities to bring children together. A key trait of friendship is close proximity and frequent opportunities to socialize.
- Highlight the child's strengths and gifts.
- Have the physical environment accessible to the child with a disability.
- Encourage independence. Follow the child's lead.
- Collaborate with general education teachers.
- Present information on disabilities to others to promote understanding.
- Teach social skills. Talk to your child about how to make and keep friends.
- Expect people to accept the child.
- Have the child attend the neighbourhood school.
- While planning the child's school goals, include community activities and developing relationships.
- Give the child time to spend with friends.

- Invite community members to participate in your family's life.
- Prepare the child to answer questions that others typically ask, such as "why do you use a hearing aid?"
- Consider how the child can make the best possible first impression in terms of clothes, hair style, or greetings.
- If the child has communication difficulties, offer meaningful comments to emphasize his or her similarities to other children.
- Be open to different types of relationships.
- Encourage the child to make friends with others who have empathy - who can "stand in the shoes" of another.
- Get information on Circle of Friends, Groups Action Planning, or other person centered future planning approaches.
- Realise that true friendship need some basis for exchange (reciprocity).

