

BUILDING FRIENDSHIPS

School provides the opportunity for all children to become active members of their community and make friends with their same age peers.

Inclusive schools provide opportunities for meaningful relationships, but unfortunately just “being there” won’t be enough for deep authentic friendships to be built. Together schools and families can increase the possibility of students with significant disability making and keeping friends by being intentional in nurturing relationships.



BELIEVE FRIENDSHIP IS POSSIBLE:

The biggest barrier to friendships is not the differences created by disability but a failure to believe that true friendship between students with and without disability is possible.

If we don’t believe, we miss the signs of friendship on offer – the spark of interest and commonality. If we love and appreciate our children, we need to hold an unshakeable belief that others will also see their gifts.

RELATIONSHIPS ARE EVERYBODY’S BUSINESS:

- Keep expectations high – expect inclusion and friendship.
- Actively nurture positive roles and ways to make a contribution within the school e.g. a choir member, a fundraiser, a library volunteer, the school photographer.
- Friendships deepen when a child participates in an area of interest alongside classmates e.g. swimming club, environment group. If interests are unclear, try the typical/popular activities for the student’s age/gender.
- Expand your imagination about HOW every child can participate alongside their peers – think creatively.
- Pay attention to the patterns of friendship at any particular age; help the student to understand socially-valued activities and ways of relating.
- Speak positively. Don’t allow others to spread messages about the child which might unwittingly undermine their image opportunities for friendships.

FOR FAMILIES:

- Be brave! Don’t ignore signs of friendship on offer because you are afraid of rejection.
- Be a detective – notice opportunities for shared activities alongside peers within and outside school.
- Promote a positive image for your child through their presentation and social skills, and, when older, their use of social media. Help them share interesting things that people may not necessarily know.
- Hang out with other families e.g. local soccer club, Friday afternoon plays at the park, swimming lessons - so you and your child can be known. Nurture your own social connections in the school community – even if it means being more social than you would normally choose.
- Ask teachers who your child likes, and regularly invite children to your home or on outings. Try not to overthink the chance for rejection because play dates are a powerful strategy for making friends and a great opportunity for other students to know your child and their interests better. You can also share helpful information informally: “Stacey loves to play hopscotch. It helps her to jump if a friend holds her hand”.
- Host birthday parties and other celebrations, such as end of term celebrations.
- Consider developing a “circle of support” or “bunch of mates” which meets at school or out of school as an intentional strategy to connect a student with disability with their peers. See thegoodlife.cru.org.au/circles for more information.

Friendship is too important to leave to chance or to the school. Don’t resent the fact that it doesn’t happen naturally, quickly or without being consistent and intentional. Seeing your child belong happily is worth the extra effort!



FOR SCHOOLS:

- Help students to connect around common interests.
- Role model the way the student should be seen, spoken about and encouraged to participate.
- Many students (not just with disability) need a bit more structure to connect with their peers – particularly in the playground. They don't need a “program” but thoughtful intervention to help join in games, or for adults to initiate some activities so they can more easily participate.

Be vigilant about avoiding common mistakes

- Don't separate students with disability from their peers e.g. special classes, a desk away from other students, part-time attendance, not attending camps/extra-curricular activities
- Focus on similarities and gifts rather than on differences. Sometimes other students need some information to help them to understand their fellow students but not at the expense of noting commonalities (Differences are not the problem, but remember we mostly make friends with people we see as “like us”).
- Avoid providing support in a way that isolates them from other students (e.g. a constantly-present teacher aide).
- If setting up a buddy system, make sure it encourages children to see the child with disability as a potential friend, not an object of charity, pity or “support”. Don't buddy the student with a disability with another child who is struggling – perhaps you could consider a buddy system for all students in the class.
- Don't expect the students with disability in the school to form their own friendship group.
- Don't assume kids can always do this on their own.

