



## Friendship Facilitation: Interview with Beth Schaffner of PEAK Parent Center, Inc. on Friendship Facilitation

**Focal Point:** What is your background in this field?

**Beth Schaffner:** I worked as a special education teacher for 20 years and for about the last 5 or 6 of those years I actually served as an inclusion facilitator in the school district for supporting general education teachers to include kids with disabilities in their classrooms. In the midst of my 20 years of teaching I actually became the parent of a young person, who is now a young man, who has some disabilities and so began at that point experiencing the role of being a parent at the same time I was experiencing the role of being an educator. So I have had both of those perspectives for a while and have felt that based on my somewhat unique position that I am able to serve as kind-of a link to help make things happen more the way they should for young people. So I began working for PEAK in 1987 and I was kind of combining my schoolwork with PEAK work at that time and then eventually moved over to working full-time at PEAK. So I've worked a lot with educators, done a lot of training with educators around friendship facilitation and inclusion, but also much broader than that as well, around what does it take to make schools into the kind of places they need to be where kids do feel a part of things, where all kids learn to their highest potential and where there's a true climate of tolerance and acceptance and community.

**F.P.:** Do the families you encounter include children with emotional, behavioral, or mental health challenges?

**B.S.:** The full range of disabilities... any disability that is covered under IDEA. We're kind of the clearinghouse here in Colorado. Sometimes, if a child is struggling in school, we'll even hear from families whose children aren't identified as needing individualized education plans. I do think the kids with the challenges around mental health issues can be the most challenging in the

context of inclusion and friendship facilitation, but we know these strategies work for all students.

**F.P.:** What kinds of things are emphasized at a PEAK friendship facilitation training?

**B.S.:** We believe its really important for folks to think about friendship facilitation in the context of their own need for friendship as well as their own experiences of friendship so that they can really personalize it. We don't want folks to think that this is just a specialized technique just to use with this particular group. We're not telling someone that they need to be friends with someone else. What we're talking about is doing some of the same things that may happen a little more naturally for you and me.

We talk about the three elements of friendship facilitation: finding opportunities, positive interpretation, and accommodations. And when you look at those individually and think about your own life, you can think of the ways that either someone has done that type of thing for you or you've done it for someone else... and it hasn't been a contrived thing.

We have slides of real, live Colorado kids in real schools participating actively with each other both in and out of school and we tell stories about each of the situations and share examples of how in that particular situation the strategies of finding opportunities, positive interpretation, and making accommodations were used. We try to make it real for people so that they can see the possibilities. Because of a traditionally more clinical approach, a lot of parents really need to be helped to shift back into possibility thinking for their own children. And that's something we really try to communicate pretty deliberately. Also, you can't look at friendship facilitation in isolation from the inclusion issue at all, because in

order for kids to have the opportunities to belong and feel they are part of things and to truly make friends, they need to be fully a part of what's happening in their general education classrooms and schools. In order for them to reach their highest potential in any part of their development, that's the foundation for it.

**F.P.:** How have things changed in the decade since you and Barbara Buswell wrote *Connecting Students*?

**B.S.:** At that time we really ran into some folks for whom the idea of kids actually being friends on a mutual basis with each other was totally in outer space. A lot of people were really focused at the time on a concept called peer tutoring as the answer for kids with disabilities having social connections. We thought very differently and we wanted to focus on real, authentic friendships and honest-to-goodness mutuality. This is not to say that peer tutoring is not a viable teaching technique in general education classrooms when used in situations where all students can at various times be both a tutor and a "tutee" for other students. But folks were thinking that peer tutoring was all that was possible for social relationships at that time and I think that has changed. It certainly hasn't changed to my satisfaction. I think there are still a lot of schools and a lot of educators who embrace that other concept, who haven't made that kind-of leap to be able to personalize this. And, of course, we have multiple examples now from our own lives, from our own children and from many, many folks who have wanted to make that leap to see that it truly is happening, it can happen, and it does happen. People with disabilities have much to contribute to the lives of other people and to their communities as a whole and unless we believe in possibilities and provide opportunities and all three of those facilitation techniques then people aren't going to be able to realize the kinds of gifted relationships that develop from these opportunities.

We believe that the only way that schools are going to be successful, that communities are going to be successful in general, is if people with disabilities are a part of that "whole" and a part of that "all" when we say "all kids should be part of their schools" and "all kids can learn" etc, etc. We really try to go in and say, "Schools need to be inclusive communities where there is a true sense of community and where everyone belongs and feels like they are a part of what's happening."

**F.P.:** What have been your experiences with your own son around these issues?

**B.S.:** Well, we advocated very strongly and persistently for my son, who is now 28 years old, to be fully included when he was in middle school and high school. We worked very hard on our long-term vision for him and knew that we wanted him to be valued in his community and wanted people to get to know him the way that we know him, which is that he's this very, very wonderful person who happens to have a disability. Some of the challenges we ran into, especially when he moved from middle school to high school, had to do with us wanting there to be some deliberate kinds of support provided around friendship facilitation. I'll never forget the reaction of the special educators in that room who made it quite obvious that they didn't see that as their realm of responsibility. So this was a big stretch and it was almost too big of a stretch for them. We persisted. We were very focused on our bottom line, which was that Rob was going to be included in the school and that we were going to work with them however we needed to ensure that he got the support that he needed. I did a lot of work with folks, sitting down with teachers and meeting with them and helping to adapt curriculums, and those kinds of things. Rob made friends in school in spite of the fact that the school staff really didn't make a deliberate effort to ensure that that happened and I'm sure it could have been better for Rob had there been a more concerted effort and more of a commitment and actual belief in the possibilities. Because we felt like the kids...it wasn't that they wouldn't have included him in other activities, or gotten together with him on the week-ends or whatever, but there had not been good modeling for them that that was a possibility... that there was almost a kind of a belief that Rob really needed to spend the week-ends with his parents—that he needed his parents close by when he wasn't in school. So there were some hurdles that we really didn't feel like we got over when he was in high school. But his school experience was not a bad one. It was still good and it was much better than it would have been if we had succumbed and put him back in mainly segregated classroom and social situations like the special education staff continued to recommend to us.

However, certainly once he got out of high school and he's been out for almost 10 years now, he has friends. He's such a party person. He's on regular bowling league. He loves bowling. He loves basketball. He's got one friend and they get together once a week and go to the YMCA and play basketball together. He loves sports activities. He has another friend who often gets tickets to the Denver Broncos games and he'll invite him to go along. He really has a pretty full life. He lives in his own home now with support; he has a roommate who is

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not a person with a disability. He works now in a grocery store that's still in the same community where his school was. He wants a job in video production and has taken several college classes to develop his skills in that field.

**F.P.:** What have you done to help with friendship facilitation for Rob since he has been out of school?

**B.S.:** We are constantly seeking new opportunities for him to be out there and to be a part of things and build on what his interests are in order to find those kinds of opportunities. We work really hard at the positive interpretation piece. We have been directly involved in training any support staff that Rob has had and that's one of the things that we are very deliberate about is training these folks about this facilitation process and about the fact that, most likely, they are going to be most successful at doing their job if they put themselves totally in the background and if they are as unobtrusive as possible, only providing support when needed. When I used to work with teachers or paraprofessionals, I would tell them "You guys need to be the behind-the-scenes people. You

need to find a way to help Rob or the students you support shine out there. And if he does need for someone to interpret his language for a while, until people understand him, then you certainly need to be there to do those kinds of things, but you also need to be cognizant of the fact that you can get in the way of those relationships happening if you are too much of a presence." So again, I think that we have tried very hard to be sure that all three of those elements are in place for Rob and some of that deliberateness has been at least in part what has made the difference for him. And of course the other part is that using those strategies really have helped Rob to shine out there and to put his best foot forward and to give people the opportunity to get to know what a wonderful person he is and how much fun he is.

Interview by **Jonathan Cook, M.S.**, a member of the *Research & Training Center (RTC) at Portland State University*. He serves as a research assistant on the *Clark County evaluation project for the Regional Research Institute* and also writes *Data Trends for the RTC*.