



FACILITATING FRIENDSHIPS FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Friendships are an important part of our lives. We rely on friends for support and companionship and to have a sense of acceptance, belonging, and community. Although we may frequently take our friendships for granted, we can usually recognize their importance in our lives. Sadly however, friends are often a scarce commodity for many people with disabilities.

People with disabilities frequently grow up isolated from mainstream society and without any friends at all, largely as a result of a service system that has segregated young people with disabilities from their non-disabled peers. Turnbull and Rueff (1997) interviewed 17 parents of children with behavioral difficulties and found that over two thirds of parents indicated that their children did not have even one friend. Research conducted by the Beach Center on Disability at the University of Kansas has shown that among families with children who have disabilities, families' highest priority was to help their children develop friendships.

Fortunately, over the last decade, programs such as the PEAK Parent Center in Colorado Springs, have begun to focus on the importance of friends for children with disabilities. PEAK and other programs have demonstrated that children with disabilities do not have to remain isolated and that concerned parents, teachers, and community members can take steps to help promote friendships.

Beth Schaffner and Barbara Buswell, who are simultaneously educators, PEAK employees and parents of children with disabilities, have been promoting friendship facilitation over the past decade, informing families, schools, and service providers that true friendships between children with and without disabilities are possible, necessary, and beneficial to all children's mental health. Together, they have written a book on friendship facilitation, *Connecting Students: A Guide to Thoughtful Friendship Facilitation for Educators & Families*, and, with coauthor Alison B. Seyler, a training manual, *Friendship Building Strategies Workshop Kit, Second Edition*. Both publications can be ordered online

from Peak's publication pages and offer specific suggestions and reflection exercises for successful friendship building. Research (Turnbull, BlueBanning, & Pereira, 2000; Turnbull, Pereira, & BlueBanning, 2000; Turnbull, Pereira, & BlueBanning, 1999) has documented the success of many of these friendship facilitation activities.

In *Connecting Students*, Schaffner and Buswell refer often to the work of Zana Lutfiyya, a professor and researcher who has specialized in social networks among people with disabilities. Dr. Lutfiyya has defined friendship facilitation as, "providing opportunities where people can comfortably come together to meet each other." Regarding friendship facilitation in a school setting, Schaffner and Buswell further elaborate:

Facilitation is people accepting responsibility to ensure that a student is connected to his or her peers and has encouragement, opportunities, and assistance to develop all sorts of relationships— including close, deep friendships. Facilitation is an unobtrusive process which taps the expertise of others who know the student well and allows the student to choose the friends with whom she wants to develop relationships.

Friendship facilitation is not an activity that takes place in a vacuum. Instead, facilitation is really one part of a broader focus on inclusion in which people with disabilities are fully included and accepted into mainstream educational and social venues. While inclusion is a necessary prerequisite for the development of friendships between students with and without disabilities, inclusion on its own may not be enough to foster friendship development. Friendship facilitation capitalizes on inclusion by actively taking steps to increase the chances for friendships to develop. Although friendship facilitation is a personalized process, tailored to an individual's needs, three elements are central to all friendship facilitation:

- finding opportunities,
- interpretation, and
- accommodation.

Finding opportunities refers to the need for facilitators (parents, brothers and sisters, teachers, service providers, other students, etc.) to seek out or create opportunities for a child with a disability to participate in activities with peers. A facilitator's positive **interpretation** of a child with disabilities highlights the child's strengths and helps peers to recognize his or her positive qualities. The following story, one of many vignettes in *Connecting Students*, describes one example of friendship facilitation and positive interpretation:

Keisha's classmates seemed to be overly preoccupied with tattling when she misbehaved on the playground. Pat, a school psychologist who is part of Keisha's planning team, suggested to the teacher that she encourage the students to report only good things that they catch each other doing when they come in from recess. Pat's intervention turned the situation around, stopped the challenging behaviors, and helped all of the students in the class to see each other in a more positive light. (p. 22)

Finally, accommodations may be necessary to allow friendships to develop and flourish. Accommodations may take many forms, depending on the type and severity of disability, but all share in common a facilitator's willingness to structure the physical environment so that children with disabilities are not excluded from activities.

The friendship facilitation activities described by Schaffner and Buswell differ from some common practices used by schools and other programs. In fact, many traditional activities may actually be counterproductive to friendship facilitation by setting young people with disabilities apart from other young people. It is important, they note, that friendships are not one-sided, such as when someone volunteers or is paid to help a person with a disability. Instead, like all

friendships, relationships should be voluntary, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial. "How to Encourage Friendships for Children with Disabilities," an article produced by the Beach Center, offers additional, specific suggestions of activities that encourage friendships.

The implementation of friendship facilitation activities has far reaching implications that go beyond the central goal of assisting people with disabilities in the pursuit of friendships. These activities also promote respect and appreciation of diversity among peers without disabilities, and perhaps most importantly, friendship facilitation helps families, service providers, and all those who interact with young people with disabilities focus on strengths and the exciting potential and possibilities found in all children.

References

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