GUIDE TO IMPLEMENTATION

for Creating and Sustaining Peer Networks

What can educators do to create and sustain peer networks?

This guide lists specific steps you can take to support peer relationships for students with complex access needs.

Facilitating social relationships not only benefits students with disabilities but also helps create a school climate in which all students are welcomed and valued for their unique differences. Schools are placing a greater emphasis on the emotional well-being of all students, so facilitating belonging and relationships for students with disabilities fits nicely into all school's goals.

There is simply no cookbook for facilitating social relationships. Doing it well requires sensitivity to differences in student backgrounds, family preferences and strengths, and the developmental changes that children experience as they grow older. Even though we cannot provide a foolproof recipe, families and schools with experience in this area have shared some lessons learned over the past 40 years or so:

- **Involve the student.** Ask students to share their thoughts and feelings about their current social relationships and do not assume that the student is dissatisfied with the depth and breadth of their current relationships. On the other hand, if a student appears to have few real friends, extend the invitation to help expand and deepen their relationships.
- **Involve the student's family.** A fulfilling social life extends beyond the school walls, and for friendships to flourish, families need to be involved. They need to be asked about their capacity to host playdates, sleepovers, or outings so that the student's hopes are not dashed because of the lack of family capacity and support.
- **Complete a Circle of Relationships Map.** For a student with significant communication challenges, you may need to ask the student's grade-level peers, siblings, and family members to help complete this task. When we complete a Circle of Relationships Map, we specifically ask, "With whom and where does this student spend time with peers who have common interests?"
  - — If the student's outer circle is full – that is, people who are paid to be in the life of the student, but the "best friends" and "shared activities" circles are bare - then intentional friendship facilitation may be warranted.
  - — Focus first on removing the unintentional barriers that may be getting in the way of friendships.

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Barrier	Potential Solution
Not presuming competence	• Believing that all students can learn, communicate, be included, and have real friends. • Talking to students as if they understand everything you say. Demonstrate your presumption of competence in the questions you ask students and the conversations in which they are included. • Providing all students with a way to communicate about age-appropriate academic and social topics.
Students being partially "included"	If the student with complex access needs is included in just a few general education classes, it can send the message to the student and their peers that there is something about the student that requires them to "go away" for part of their day. • Fully include students with the use of quality instructional support plans delivered with a high degree of fidelity.
Overreliance on 1:1 assistants or paraprofessionals	• Model how paraprofessionals can provide support but fade supports, or "back away," when the student doesn't need additional support. • Build networks of peer supports across all academic areas. • Provide feedback and modeling if paraprofessionals are hovering over students. • Give students a way to ask a paraprofessional to "give them some space."
Mistaking peer support for friendship	Peer supports during academics are valuable, but they do not necessarily lead to reciprocal social relationships. • Evaluate the quality of a student's social relationships by determining if students are in contact with one another outside of school without adult facilitation.
Creating friendship "programs"	A friendship program that does not create parity, or equality, between students with and without disabilities can do more harm than good. If the motivation of students without disabilities is benevolence or looking for something to put on their college application, then parity is unlikely to occur. Programs are often dependent upon current funding or staffing resources. • Strive to create social relationship supports that are self-sustaining.

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Seeing disability as deficiency and the reason students do not have friends	If we expect students with complex access needs to change before they can have friends, then we send the message that they are not OK just as they are. Real friends make allowances for one another's eccentricities and don't require perfection. • Teach all students about the history of how society has treated individuals with disabilities. • Ask adults with disabilities to speak to groups of students and tell their life stories. • Emphasize that having a disability is a very personal in regards to identity. Some people see their disabilities as just one part of their identity and others view their disability as inextricably wound with their core selves. Respect both points of view.
Thinking that friendship is not the responsibility of schools	Schools that focus on student emotional well-being and health often find that their students do better academically. And even if they do not, a commitment to a welcoming school community is often in line with a school's overall mission statement.
Inaccessibility of transportation and public spaces	Schools are responsible for providing equal access to both academic and extracurricular activities for students with disabilities. So, if a student with complex access needs is part of the football team (as player, manager, cheerleader) then accessible transportation may be required. • Invite students without disabilities to ride on the accessible bus to and from school and after-school events. • Think about all aspects of accessibility in public spaces, not just the physical environment. Consider lighting, sound, textures, and visual information.
Implementing friendship strategies before eliminating barriers	If we try to facilitate social relationships between students with and without disabilities without addressing barriers first, this can lead to frustration for everyone, and the unfortunate judgment that "nobody wants to be friends with that kid."

If removing barriers does not result in fuller circles of relationships, then it is time to consider more intentional facilitation of relationships. Two strategies have proven effective for children and adults with significant disabilities:

- Circle of Friends or Circle of Support
- Engaging a Bridge Builder

This document was designed to accompany the Creating and Sustaining Peer Networks training from Texas SPED Support.

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