

## Facilitating Social Relationships



Micah Fialka-Feldman and Nicole Schwartz walk down a hallway at Syracuse University between classes.

A sense of belonging is a necessary foundation for the achievement of self-actualization. People with disabilities who do not have friends are lonely, isolated, and less likely to be a part of the community. To imagine that people with disabilities could have a full life surrounded only by professionals is to categorize them as “others” rather than to understand their common humanity. We need only plot our own circle of friends to realize how empty our lives would be if we only interacted with our dentist, our doctor, our plumber, and our boss.

It has become popular in recent years to support the development of students’ social relationships by establishing friendship clubs for students with and without disabilities. Students without disabilities are recruited to be members of these clubs, such as [Best Buddies](#), in exchange for academic or community service credit. Adults schedule

regular get-togethers for club members such as bowling or pizza parties. Although some genuine friendships may arise from these special friends groups, there are unintentional consequences. The most harmful of these is perpetuating the idea that students with disabilities are unable to make friends unless those friends are paid (i.e., given credit) to be with them.

### What We Need To Stop Doing

In *Seeing the Charade: What We Need to Do and Undo to Make Friendships Happen*, Tashie, Shapiro-Barnard, and Rossetti (2006) argue that there are seemingly impenetrable barriers that prevent students with and without disabilities from becoming friends, and that we must address these barriers before thinking about taking intentional steps to facilitate social relationships.

The first barrier they identify is blaming a lack of friendships on certain characteristics of students with disabilities, such as the way they look, the way they talk, or the way they behave. They write:

Now just in case you are worried, this is not the time in the book for a discussion of all the things about Liana that make it harder for her to make friends. In fact, nowhere in this book or in anything else we have written, will there be any discussion of this topic. Sure, there are things all of us could do to make ourselves more interesting, appealing, and likeable to potential friends. But despite our many “faults,” we all still have friends. So this is not about “fixing” Liana to make her more desirable. Liana... is fine just the way she is.

Other barriers include students with disabilities not being valued members of general education classes, making dangerous assumptions about students’ intellectual capabilities, being over-reliant on one-on-one paraprofessionals, mistaking peer support as friendship, and tolerating a culture of prejudice. Although removing these barriers is often difficult, not doing so fails to address the real causes of a student’s lack of friendships, and sets up the student and his family for disappointment.

### When Facilitation is Necessary

If authentic social relationships do not emerge once we have removed barriers and implemented the essential considerations for friendship, then there is a role for careful facilitation. When students themselves are empowered to address the barriers to friendship that exist for their classmates, they are more likely to own the solutions that they develop, rather than if the ideas had come from adults. And after all, who are the real experts on friendship? One avenue for this intentional facilitation is establishing an individual student’s circle of belonging and support. A circle is a group of people who



## ESSENTIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR FRIENDSHIP

**In addition to removing barriers, we need to put into place the essential considerations for friendship, including:**

1. Seeing value and competence in students with disabilities
2. Giving students a way to communicate at all times about the same things as typical students
3. Fully including students in heterogeneous general education classes
4. Giving students access to age-appropriate materials and activities
5. Providing support in a way that encourages interdependence and independence
6. Forging partnerships between home and school to facilitate friendships and participation in social activities
7. Positioning students with disabilities to give back to their school and home communities so that they are not always on the receiving end of help

**FOR MORE,** read [Membership and Participation: Defining Features of Inclusive Education](#).



Garrett Shows plays Unified Basketball in a scene from a scene from the postsecondary transition film [Garrett Shows: I'm in Charge](#). "It's kids with and without disabilities playing together," Garrett says in the film. "It's definitely fun and you get to interact and make friendships which is huge for me."

are invited to get to know a student who is not socially connected in a meaningful way. As seen in [Intelligent Lives](#), the invitation that Micah extended is not, "Would you please become friends with me?," but rather, "Would you like to join a group of people who are going to meet with me to figure out how I can get more connected with my classmates at Syracuse?"

Another example: When a student named Anna returned to her neighborhood school after spending several years in an out-of-district program for students with autism and behavior challenges, a group of other 6th graders were invited to be part of "Team Anna." Anna and her team met every Thursday after school to talk, eat snacks, and play computer games. Anna's paraeducator



#### LEARN MORE

Click to read *Inclusion Includes Belonging: How to Create and Sustain a Circle of Support*.

*"Team Anna" met every Thursday after school to talk, eat snacks, and play computer games.*

provided support to the kids as they tackled issues, such as Anna's difficulty participating in physical education class and the loneliness she experienced on weekends. During one of the meetings, paraeducator Sue asked the kids to talk about what they thought was standing in the way of Anna being just a regular kid in the school. There was not one student who mentioned her disabilities. They did point out, however, that because Anna rode the special education bus, she arrived later than her classmates, had a difficult time settling into the morning routine, and had to leave early at the end of the day, causing her to miss about 15 minutes of free time. After Sue spoke with Anna's parents about this

issue, they met with the principal and the Director of Student Transportation, and agreed that Anna could ride the regular bus as long as a harness seatbelt could be installed.

One idea that two of the group members came up with was for them to serve as Anna's "bridge builders" during the weekends. These students were part of "Team Anna." One student said that she was enrolled in a hip-hop dance group that operated out of a local community center. She asked Anna if she'd like to come to class the following Saturday and Anna enthusiastically said "yes." Another student said that she and a couple of friends were going to sell baked goods outside the local grocery store on Sunday to raise money for their "End of Sixth Grade" environmental camp experience. The group developed a plan for Anna to join them, and they all worked together during their remaining meeting time to create a poster promoting the cause.

Circles of belonging and support have to be organized for the right reasons, with the right attitude, and in most cases, facilitated by an adult. The group's facilitator role is to 1) work with the student and his or her family to issue the initial invitation to join; 2) support the group's organizational needs such as transportation, parent permissions,



Naomie Monplaisir hugs a co-worker at Empire Beauty School. An IEP vision statement for Naomie for her school years might have included this statement: "The most important thing for Naomie is to have friends, not 'special' buddies. When she is with her friends, she communicates more, learns more, and feels a sense of belonging."

and accessible meeting locations; and 3) help the group confront attitudes that stand in the way of friendship, such as peer pressure, prejudice, benevolence, and pity.

Facilitating social relationships isn't a matter of following a step-by-step guide or cookbook recipe. This is the hard work of inclusion that pays off not only in academic benefits, but in deeper social relationships than cannot be accomplished by a Best Buddies type of group alone.

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