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Friendships Matter

Sometimes, children need help making and keeping friends, and this is especially true for children and teens with disabilities. While parents and teachers can make a big difference, they need to tread lightly.

Here are a few other tips:

1) Watch from a distance. Often, children and teens with disabilities do not have a good sense for how they're perceived by their peers, and will commit social mistakes without realizing it. Adults can help by discussing what went wrong, why it happened, and what could be done differently next time. Be as sensitive with your child as

you would be with a close adult friend -- too much negative feedback can hurt your child's self-esteem.

2) Keep it simple and small. A child doesn't need to be part of a big group or get invited to lots of parties to be happy. Studies show that having even one close friend is all it takes for a child to develop social confidence. One-on-one play dates usually work best. With threesomes, it's easy for one child to be left out - or ganged up on. And try to keep play dates short. For children age 10 or under, two hours is probably plenty of time. Let things end on an up note.

3) Choose wisely. Children with disabilities may be less socially mature than their peers, and often, they are painfully aware of it. It may be helpful if your child develops friendships with children a year or two younger – this way, he won't feel left behind. It can also be a good idea to follow special interests, so if your child loves trains, superheroes or Pokémon, look for other children who share this interest. A shared interest will help your child feel more confident and engaged.

“ I get by with a little
 help from my friends... ”
 -The Beatles

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Help is a Call Away – Do you or someone you know need advocacy assistance? Call our PARENT ASSISTANCE LINE (PAL) for help. Toll Free: 1-877-287-2724.

Learning Friendship Skills Pays Off

Many parents call ASAH with questions about private special education. After they have asked about curriculum, teacher qualifications, class size, and more, almost every parent asks about friendships.

“Will my child have friends?”

As the father of seven grown children, I understand the concern. We all want our children to have friends – to go to birthday parties, the prom, and get asked to sleep overs and play dates. Friendship is the universal glue of childhood.

I can answer that question by telling you what other parents have told our school leaders, over and over again.

“Before my child came to a private school, he was lonely. He sat by himself on the bus, or sat with a special “buddy” at lunch.”

“She spent most of her time with adults.”

“But once he came to a private school, he really had friends – a group of friends who wanted to be with him, and who liked him for who he is.”

“For the first time, she had play dates, and birthday parties. And phone calls, and texts from friends.”

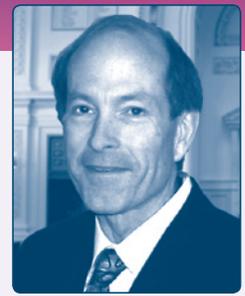
“He is part of a team – and he gets to play the game, not watch from the bench.”

“She is in the play, not as a stagehand or selling tickets, but with a part.”

In short – they have *real* friends.

At ASAH member schools, we know that having and keeping friends is as important as math and science. We know that our students may need help learning soft skills of friendship – how to listen, how to help someone else, and even how to ask to play with someone. It is sometimes called “the hidden curriculum,” but at private special education schools, it is not hidden – it is taught.

And when we talk to parents of children who have graduated from our schools, we learn that many of the friendships linger into adulthood – and the “friendship skills” they learned as children have currency on the job!



Gerry Thiers
ASAH Executive Director



Gerry Thiers,
ASAH Executive Director

Friendships Matter *continued*

4) Don't allow teasing. Bullying and playful banter are an inevitable part of childhood, but many children with disabilities don't know how to respond. Encourage your child to stand up to teasing, but not to overreact, which might escalate the problem.

5) Find a mentor. Children and teens may be more likely to take advice or instruction from a ‘big brother’ or ‘big sister’. Ask the older sibling of one of your child's classmates or a family friend if he will be an informal mentor to your child. For help for a teen or young adult, check out the local college to see if there are students who would be willing to be a mentor.



Measure Establishing RTI Initiative in New Jersey Signed by Governor Christie

Legislation to establish a Response to Intervention Initiative (RTI) within the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) has been signed by the Governor. The bipartisan measure (S-496 and A-2566) was co-sponsored by a long list of education leaders and advocates from both the Assembly and the Senate.

RTI is a widely used methodology to identify struggling learners, maximize student achievement, and reduce behavior problems.

The initiative includes the dissemination of information and guidance regarding: the development and effective implementation of an RTI framework as a methodology for identifying struggling learners, maximizing student achievement, and reducing behavioral problems; and the use of an RTI framework for identifying students with specific learning disabilities. The commissioner is required to provide technical assistance and training to school districts, and ensure that when an RTI framework is implemented by a school district, it includes certain elements.

The bill is consistent with IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), which expressly allows school districts to utilize RTI to identify students with specific learning disabilities.

U.S. Department of Education Issues Guidance on Implementing Behavior Supports

In August, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) released a “Dear Colleague” letter to school districts indicating concern over data that show students with disabilities are disciplined far more often than their peers without disabilities.

The 16-page document clarifies that the failure to consider and provide for needed behavioral supports through the IEP process is likely to result in a student not receiving a meaningful educational benefit or a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). The letter, organized into five areas, also provides alternatives to disciplinary removal, which schools can apply instead of exclusionary disciplinary measures.



Data indicate that students with disabilities are twice as likely to be suspended as students without disabilities, and short-term disciplinary removals from current placement strongly suggest that students with disabilities may not be receiving appropriate behavioral interventions and supports. OSEP issued the guidance in order to help schools keep these students in school, by providing individual and whole-school behavioral supports. The letter emphasizes that these supports might include “instruction and reinforcement of school expectations, violence prevention programs, anger management groups, counseling for mental health issues, life skills training, or social skills instruction.”



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DID YOU KNOW:



A New Way for Parents to File for Due Process

As of July 1, 2016, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) is accepting requests for mediation and due process through an OSEP email. They will also continue to accept requests for mediation and due process via fax and traditional mail.

To file by fax: (609) 984-8422

To file by mail:

Office of Special Education Programs,
New Jersey Department of Education,
PO Box 500, Trenton, NJ 08625-0500

To file by email:

osepdisputeresolution@doe.state.nj.us

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