MAKING FRIENDS
with and without disabilities
IN SCHOOL

A Toolkit for Teachers, Paraprofessionals, and Parents

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Widening the Circle (Expanding opportunities for friendships between people with and without disabilities) is a project under the auspices of The Arc of Massachusetts, funded by the MA Department of Developmental Services. The project, originally titled "Real Friends", is focusing on friendships in various settings.

Our focus for FY2017 has been SCHOOLS. This "Making Friends in School Toolkit" will help teachers and parents take better advantage of opportunities to facilitate relationships between students with and without disabilities.

Widening the Circle is guided by a Project Advisory Committee comprised of people with and without disabilities from every region in the state and with experience in supporting people to develop relationships and training others in this important work.

You can find out more about Widening the Circle at **thearcofmass.org/programs/widening-the-circle/.**

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Section I. Introduction

School is—by definition—a place of learning. It is where most of us learn to read and write and add and subtract. It's where we first learn about biology and history and foreign languages.

It may be the first place where we pick up a baseball or sketch with charcoal or play the trombone or act a part on stage.

School is also where we learn and practice our social skills. How do we relate with teachers? How do we get along in a class with other students our age? How do we know what's okay to do and what's not okay? What do we do when we don't agree with someone? What do we do when we notice someone is "left out"? What do we do if we're feeling "left out"?

School is where we often first begin the "dance" that can result in friendships. This dance is more difficult for some than for others, including many students with disabilities. It is up to all of us—teachers, paraprofessionals, parents, and fellow students—to be sure that no one is left out. Friendships are too important to be ignored. And friendships between and among students with and without disabilities benefit EVERYONE!

We hope that this Toolkit will help you increase the opportunities for meaningful relationships between all students. Because of our emphasis on friendships between students with and without disabilities, this resource may not be helpful for teachers in segregated schools where all the student have disabilities.

Please understand that we value the friendships that develop between and among individuals who have disabilities, but we are investing our energies in relationships that are less common but very worthwhile to support. Also, we are big believers in "inclusion," but we do not see inclusion as an end in and of itself. Inclusion is a necessary step to friendship; it is not a final goal. In other words, inclusion alone is not enough to make friends.

This Toolkit is structured to address the challenge of friendships between students with and without disabilities in inclusive settings. It assumes as much inclusion as possible as the starting point, and it contains practical strategies to promote friendship development from there.

Social acceptance and daily greetings are positive interactions.

I just wish that people didn't walk away after they said hi or gave a high-five.

Section II.
Why Friends in School are Important

Friendships are often what students of all ages look forward to most -- and later remember -- about school. We firmly believe that all students can and should have friends. This includes students with disabilities who have the most significant support needs.

There are clear and important benefits for EVERYONE when friendships between students with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities are encouraged and supported. Specifically, friendships are valuable social relationships that result in personal benefit across the life-span, provide a vehicle for developmental gains, and enrich the lives of each friend.[1]

Having a friend…

RESULTS IN PERSONAL BENEFIT.
Students and adults alike are happier when they have friends.[2,3] Having a friend leads to emotional well-being, a sense of belonging, and opportunities for social integration and communication.[4,5] Students with mutual and reciprocal friendships are more likely to show fewer depressive symptoms and to have greater self-esteem and social adjustment as young adults.[6,7]

FACILITATES DEVELOPMENTAL GAINS.
Friendship facilitates the acquisition of interpersonal skills and creates opportunities for healthy social, emotional, and cognitive development across childhood and adolescence.[8] Moreover, friendship provides unique and motivating contexts in which development occurs based on the time and activities students share.[9]

LEADS TO POSITIVE SCHOOL OUTCOMES.
Reciprocal and meaningful peer relationships in adolescence have resulted in greater school engagement.[10] Adolescents with reciprocated friendships report higher levels of school belonging, and both reciprocity and school belonging are related to better academic performance.[11]

PROTECTS AGAINST BULLYING EXPERIENCES.
Having friends, and especially having supportive friends, can act as a buffer to protect students from negative experiences such as bullying victimization.[12,13] For middle and high school students with friends, higher levels of perceived support from their friends were related to lower levels of both bullying victimization and perpetration.[14]

ENRICHES INDIVIDUAL LIVES AND CLASSROOM COMMUNITY.
Students with and without disabilities each receive distinct benefits when they develop friendships, including the joy of personal connections, the development of shared experiences and humor, and a greater appreciation for human diversity.[15-17] Students without disabilities may learn new skills (e.g., how to use a communication device) and have their own social-emotional needs fulfilled.[18,19] Classroom communities may also become more caring and inclusive when friendships between students with and without disabilities are encouraged and supported.[20]

Friendship

Despite its universal nature, friendship may mean different things to different people. Thus, it is important that we start with a common definition. Friendship is: a voluntary and reciprocal relationship in which two students exhibit mutual attachment to one another, frequent proximity and companionship, and evidence of enjoyment or affection.

Friendships typically include several related components *(see Table 1)*. The first four components are characteristic of children's friendships; the other components become more salient in friendships during adolescence and beyond.[23]

Table 1

The Most Common Components of Friendship[23]

PROXIMITY	Proximity provides the initial opportunity. Students befriend those they see regularly.
SIMILARITY	Likeness (e.g., age, interests) often leads to the initial connection.
TRANSCENDING CONTEXT	Friends spend time together in multiple settings.
COMPANIONSHIP	Friends share experiences and do things together.
RECIPROCITY	Friendship is a give-and-take relationship in which there is a balanced exchange of social interactions.
MUTUALITY	Friends choose to be with each other and nominate each other as friends.
HELP/SUPPORT	Friends provide each other with informational support (e.g., advice), emotional support, and instrumental (or tangible) support.
CONFLICT MANAGEMENT	Friends may disagree, but they can resolve their differences.
STABILITY	Stability develops from a conflict-free relationship over time, which is important for maintaining friendship.
TRUST/LOYALTY	Friends can share things with each other without judgment; friends will not betray each other.
INTIMACY/ DISCLOSURE	Friends feel an emotional bond and can disclose personal information, which deepens the relationship beyond mutuality.

Specific to students with disabilities, several components should be given extra consideration.

PROXIMITY AND COMPANIONSHIP can each be increased through school and community inclusion.[24-26]

TRANSCENDING CONTEXT is important to consider because relationships between students with and without disabilities may only occur in school; authentic friendships are typically distinguished by being enacted in multiple settings.[27,28]

RECIPROCITY may be the most critical component, as many relationships between students with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities tend to be unilateral or one-sided, in which the typically developing student primarily helps or supports the student with a disability; these are not friendships.[20,28-31] The majority of our focus group participants echoed the research in clearly indicating that friendship is a two-way relationship that requires a deeper connection than just helping someone.

MUTUALITY can be an important consideration when students with and without disabilities interact within a friendship club or other teacher-structured social program. Typically developing students may have chosen to join that program for class credit or volunteer recognition, and they may not yet be able to nominate their peer with a disability as a friend. In such programs, the students may get to know each other and become friends, of course, but friendship is an uncompensated relationship.[17,32]

Ultimately, we want students with and without disabilities to develop authentic friendships that include all of these components. In such friendships, students are valued just as they are. One focus group participant provided a personal definition of friendship that reflects this sense of belonging: "Friendship is having someone understand your quirks and just going with it."

TODD's STORY

My brother Todd (now, an adult) was included in general education classrooms throughout elementary, middle, and high school.

He was accepted by caring and helpful classmates at all levels. He was possibly the most popular or well-known student in each of his schools. It seemed that wherever we went as a family - whether it was a grocery store, a restaurant, the hockey rink for our other brothers' hockey games, or the theater for our sister's ballet recital – people would come over and say hi to Todd. Adults and students of all ages seemed genuinely excited to see him, and they frequently mentioned how happy he was. Often, we didn't know these people ourselves, and they would always explain that they were in class with Todd or knew him from school. Clearly, inclusion is critical to friendships.

However, despite his popularity, Todd was never called at home and he never hung out with friends outside of school. In fact, he did not ever develop a true friend -- and still hasn't. Todd was included and accepted, but not befriended. One of our focus group participants, the mother of a school-aged boy also with cerebral palsy, shared that her son was similarly known but not befriended by peers. She described, "He is extremely high-fived!"

Don't get me wrong. Social acceptance and daily greetings are positive interactions. I just wish that people didn't walk away after they said hi or gave a high-five. I wish they stuck around to get to know Todd and hang out together. I still wonder how Todd could be so popular, but not embraced as a potential friend by his peers. It is our intention that this Toolkit helps to foster not only social acceptance and daily greetings, but meaningful interactions and authentic friendship between students with and without disabilities.

-ZACH ROSSETTI

[The] biggest barrier was that he always had an aide with him. And I think that the older kids get, it gives you the impression that if he can't be alone then he must need that extra help and I'm probably not qualified.

-HS SOPHOMORE

Section III.
Making Friends in School: Strategies for All

Promoting Friendship Development by Facilitating Social Opportunities
This chapter includes an overview of our approach to promoting friendship development between students with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities in inclusive settings. It includes strategies to use with students at all grade levels. This framework can and should be individualized with all students.

We can't *make* friendships happen. There is a certain element that is unknown about how and why two students connect socially. And, we can't *force* two students to be friends. The result would be less than friendship. But, as one of our focus group participants stated, "Friendship happens when someone else sees the coolness of the person." Thus, the approach we take in this Toolkit is to maximize social opportunities that can lead to the development of friendships.

Specifically, we focus on direct support (i.e., strategies) from teachers and paraprofessionals to *increase the quantity* and *improve the quality* of social interaction opportunities between students with and without disabilities. By experiencing more consistent (i.e., increased quantity) social interaction opportunities that are based on shared interests and common experiences over time (i.e., improved quality), students with and without disabilities will be more likely to develop reciprocal and mutual friendships that extend beyond the school walls.

Our focus is supported by research indicating that social opportunities play a more prominent role in friendship development than the social skills of students with disabilities.[33-37] In other words, students with even the most significant support needs can interact socially and develop friendships with their typically developing peers when given opportunities (and support) to do so. The key is that students with and without disabilities share motivating and authentic experiences together. The role for adults (teachers, paraprofessionals, and parents) is to create these opportunities, prepare students for them, and then step back to let students with and without disabilities engage as peers. In several research studies, students with disabilities who exhibited social skills deficits and had significant support needs engaged in positive social interactions with peers and nominated friends, often with prompting and facilitative support from adults.[17,23,38] Other studies also show that direct support from teachers (and parents) is a critical factor when students with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities have developed and maintained friendships.[20,27,39-41]

The first strategy: Develop a friendship mindset.

As the first and foundational strategy for this Toolkit, we suggest that teachers and paraprofessionals (and parents) develop a "Friendship Mindset." This means thinking constantly about the quantity and quality of your students' social interaction opportunities. Pay close attention to how students with and without disabilities are interacting together. Consider the social implications of your academic decisions (e.g., type of instruction and grouping, adult proximity to students with disabilities). Strive to support students with disabilities to do all that their classmates do during each and every school day. And most importantly, believe that the student with a disability not only can develop and maintain an authentic friendship, but would make a wonderful friend.

Strategies to Increase the **Quantity** of Social Opportunities

Students with and without disabilities need to spend time together to get to know each other and recognize shared interests and other similarities that form the basis of friendship. They also need to be together in the classroom to engage in shared activities, as well as the down time between activities. Multiple studies indicate that regular contact in inclusive settings with opportunities for meaningful interaction can lead to higher quality social interactions and ultimately to the development of friendships between students with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities.[18,19,28,41-45] Thus, this first set of strategies for students at all grade levels focuses on increasing the quantity of social interaction opportunities.

> **MAXIMIZE INCLUSION.**

IDEA's Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) principle mandates a presumption of inclusion, specifically that students with disabilities are educated with nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate.[46] LRE also stipulates that accessing the general education curriculum includes extracurricular activities (e.g., clubs, after-school programming) and non-academic activities (e.g., lunch, recess, transportation, dances, and spectator-sport activities). Thus, even if the student is not included full-time in the general education classroom, social interaction opportunities should be maximized during extracurricular and non-academic activities.

Ask yourself two questions: Do students with and without disabilities participate together in the same places at the same times? If not, what supports are needed to do so? Use formal indicators of inclusive education (**www.iodbookstore.org/products/Essential-Best-Practices-in-Inclusive-Schools.html**) as a guide to systematically identify areas of improvement.[47]

> **WRITE SOCIAL GOALS INTO THE IEP.**

Formally adding social goals to the IEP allows the entire IEP team to focus on supporting friendships and inherently includes individualized supports, data collection, and progress monitoring and reporting. Goals may be written specifically in the functional area of social skills (e.g., Given visual supports and the social script she rehearsed through role playing, Sarah will initiate a greeting/back and forth conversation with peers…). Academic goals may also include a social component (e.g., When prompted from his peer tutor, Jose will write a five-sentence descriptive paragraph…). For additional information see "How to Use Your IEP to Promote Connections and Friendships." It appeared in the Spring 2016 issue of the Arc of Massachusetts's newsletter, Advocate (See page 12 at **thearcofmass.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Advocate04.16.pdf**).

> **BUILD BRIDGES.**

This strategy is all about connecting students who may not be connecting on their own. It consists of actively and strategically partnering students.[41,48] After analyzing your student's social opportunities and the classroom social context, think about the most effective ways to increase social opportunities between students with and without disabilities generally and/or specifically with classmates who have similar interests or seem interested in each other. Some examples include:

- Pair up students in your class through Peer Tutoring arrangements (elementary school) and Peer Networking strategies (middle and high school).These strategies are known as Peer Mediated Instruction and Intervention (**http://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/sites/autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/files/PMII_Overview.pdf**), and are an evidence-based practice for elementary school students and an emerging practice for middle and high school students.

  » Strive to implement peer tutoring and peer networks with reciprocal roles.[49] Remember, friendships result from horizontal (reciprocal; same social power) relationships rather than vertical (hierarchical; with individuals with greater knowledge or social power) relationships.[50]

- Create interactive activities (e.g., shared projects) and cooperative tasks (e.g., shared jobs) in which students can participate together. Figuring out how to work together can be a precursor to friendship development.

- Find ways for the student to join typical activities and clubs (focused on the student's interest) rather than creating "special" ones. And, let the student attend with a peer rather than a paraprofessional or teacher.

STUDENT POV

"Friendships seem to require only a mutual desire and a heart open enough to a great new opportunity. It seems a simple statement.

We are willing and ready to connect with other kids, and adults must quietly step into the background, camouflaging their help as a tiger who may hide in full view.

It's the needed disguise of the adult who smooths the way with the friendship, then stands back in the shadows, observing the complicated dance of steps taking you to the feeling of confidence."

-HS SENIOR
WITH AUTISM

Strategies to Increase the **Quantity** of Social Opportunities

(CONTINUED)

❯ DECREASE ADULT PROXIMITY.

Researchers have cautioned against the possible barrier adult proximity can be to friendship formation, especially by paraprofessionals, and the tendency for students to interact with individually assigned adults rather than peers.[51-53] Indeed, when adults back away from a student, classmates fill that space time and time again.[41,54] As such, look for ways to decrease adult proximity/support and increase peer proximity/support.[55,56] It may be especially effective for adults to pull peers in (e.g., prompts, explicit invitations) as they fade back.[41] Paraprofessionals and teachers should still monitor students from afar and provide support or intervention as appropriate.

❯ BE A FACILITATOR.

With a friendship mindset, teachers and paraprofessionals can facilitate social interactions between students with and without disabilities throughout the day. First, model how students with and without disabilities can interact.[48,56,57] Then, do what you can to a) create new social opportunities, and b) take advantage of missed social opportunities[41]:

- You can create opportunities by strategically grouping (e.g., same table) or scheduling (e.g., same free period) students to be together, prompting students to interact, and redirecting conversations to students with disabilities. For example, if a student asks you about a classmate's communication device or a particular behavior, direct him or her to ask the student with a disability. You may also consider making a purposeful error that results in a new social opportunity (e.g., "Oops, I forgot crayons. Can you two share?").

- Missed opportunities occur when students with disabilities are not with their classmates during social times of the day. Some examples include traveling in crowded hallways, hanging out during free time in the classroom, eating lunch, and playing at recess. Try to maximize interactions during these social times of the day, especially lunch and recess.

Strategies to Improve the **Quality** of Social Opportunities

In addition to increasing social interaction opportunities between students with and without disabilities, it is also critical to focus on improving the quality of social interaction opportunities. Two students may interact frequently, but their social interactions could be one-sided, surface level, focused on help/support only, or otherwise not conducive to friendship development. Higher quality interactions include more than sharing space, being polite, and interacting superficially.[34] Our goal is that social interaction opportunities between students with and without disabilities go beyond mere acceptance, greetings, and working together in class to instead be mutual, reciprocal, and based on shared interests and common social experiences across multiple settings over time.[20,28]

Higher quality interactions are also those that are enjoyable and successful for the students. Sometimes students with and without disabilities may begin to interact, but then encounter a difficulty that stops the interaction. Two types of low quality social opportunities are *squandered interactions* (i.e., initiation from peer but no response from student with IDD) and *stalled interactions* (i.e., interactions between students with and without IDD that start off well but then take a turn for the worse).[20] We recommend that teachers and paraprofessionals pay attention to these quality components of social interaction opportunities and look to provide individualized intervention in the moment to address these difficulties and improve the quality of students' social interaction opportunities.

ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF SOCIAL INTERACTION OPPORTUNITIES INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

> **HIGHLIGHT STUDENTS' SIMILARITIES.**
> Since friendships are largely based on shared interests, teachers and paraprofessionals should identify and highlight similarities and interests between students.[48,55] Two students who love the Red Sox, enjoy going out to the movies, or prefer staying home to play video games should know that about one another.

> **CONVEY STUDENT STRENGTHS.***
> Students tend to befriend others they perceive as being valued in their classroom or school community. Thus, teachers and paraprofessionals should find ways to convey the strengths and capabilities of students with disabilities.[48] One way to do this is by creating group activities that incorporate students' strengths (or interests) in the classroom. Such activities resulted in increased quantity and quality of social interaction opportunities without specific intervention in social skills.[58] Teachers and paraprofessionals may also provide explicit statements or reminders to peers about a student's strengths.

> **INTERPRET STUDENT BEHAVIORS.**
> This strategy is all about presenting students with disabilities to classmates in a positive and enhancing way. Teachers and paraprofessionals should explain or translate any noticeable behaviors in developmentally appropriate terms so classmates can understand them and feel comfortable. For example, I used to tell people that even though my brother Todd does not speak, he can hear and understand everything so they should talk to him like they would anyone else their age. However, Todd has a very visible disability, and most classmates and peers were already very understanding with him. As one focus group participant explained, "The more visible the disability, the more tolerant classmates are. When they don't show [signs of] disability, it is much harder." Thus, pay extra attention to explaining the behaviors of children with less visible disabilities to their peers.

* Wolfensberger's theory of Social Role Valorization provides a useful theoretical framework for this strategy (and others). The premise is that individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities are more likely to experience social belonging and friendships when they hold socially valued roles. Socially valued roles may be achieved by enhancing one's "social image" (i.e., as a peer) and one's "competencies" or skills.[59]

Strategies to Improve the **Quality** of Social Opportunities

(CONTINUED)

> **TEACH STUDENTS HOW TO INTERACT.**
> All students benefit from social skills instruction and support, not just students with disabilities.
> Typically developing students at all grade levels have asked us how to interact with peers with
> disabilities -- and even if they are allowed to!
> - Ask students what they want to know. Tell them what they need to know.
>
> - Teach specific social interaction skills to students with disabilities…AND to peers without
>   disabilities.[41,48,60] Regardless of whether you use a specific program or not, social skills
>   instruction should be systematic, explicit, and visual.[61]
>
> - Consider including disability/diversity awareness activities and lessons in your curriculum.
>   To improve social interaction opportunities, these activities and lessons should focus
>   specifically on practical characteristics and skills (e.g., how a student communicates, how to
>   greet a classmate, how to work together), and should go beyond acceptance and tolerance.
>   The goal is more consistent and more authentic social interactions as peers. When classmates
>   act only as helpers or as little teachers to their classmates with disabilities, friendships are
>   less likely.

> **PREPARE STUDENTS FOR SOCIAL INTERACTIONS.**
> To maximize successful social interaction opportunities, it is often necessary to prepare and
> prompt students for social interactions just before they occur. Look to provide visual supports,
> such as scripts and schedules, and/or verbal instruction and reminders to promote or sustain
> interactions.[41,57] For example, teachers can remind students with and without disabilities that
> they should walk together to the cafeteria and then sit together at lunch. Once there, they can
> be prompted to use a "basket" of conversation topics if they need ideas for things to talk about.

Friends are the chocolate chips in our lives! Friends are the best.

-ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENT
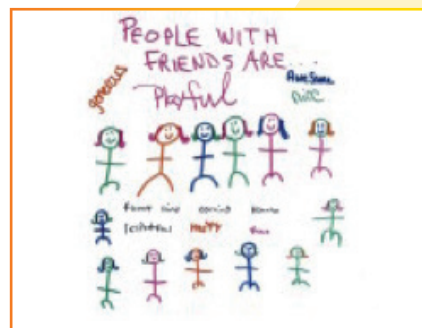
Section IV.
Making Friends In Elementary School

Friendships in Elementary School

The core components of elementary school friendships are proximity, similarity, companionship, and transcending context.[23] The most important preconditions for children's friendship are proximity and similarity/familiarity.[5,62] Then, companionship/mutual activities form the basis for friendships during early school years.[1] Typically, close friends would spend time together in multiple settings. Ultimately, children's friendships consist of playing and doing things together in multiple settings with similarly-aged peers they see often.

Both the existing literature and our focus groups also indicate a developmental progression of friendship activities and relationships.[63] Young children typically all can play together, as students in Pre-K through 1st grade are generally less picky and exclusive. Friendships at this age are mostly behavioral as they primarily consist of repeated instances of playing together. As students enter the middle grades (2nd-4th) they become more aware of social relationships, and their friendships include reciprocal benefits and support.

They are generally friendly and happy, though they may become quite concerned with fairness issues. Sports become more important for many children in the middle grades, resulting in hectic schedules and greater difficulty scheduling play dates. **Selman's Levels of Friendship** (*see Table 2*) reflect this progression in how children enact and talk about their friendships, though it is important to note that children may experience this progression differently, and there is overlap across the levels.[64,65]

Table 2

Selman's Levels of Friendship[64]
(ELEMENTARY SCHOOL)

LEVEL	DESCRIPTION	AGE RANGE	CHARACTERISTICS
Level 0	Momentary playmates	3-7 year-olds	Friendships are mostly repeated times playing together; children have little understanding of a lasting relationship.
Level 1	One-way assistance	4-9 year-olds	Friendships are still play-based. Friends are trustworthy (i.e., predictable in their behaviors), pleasing (do nice things), and play well together.
Level 2	Fair-weather cooperation	6-12 year-olds	There is a new awareness of social relationships. Trust refers to shared expectations of reciprocity and fairness (rather than behaviors only).

The context for all of this in elementary school is the traditional model of one teacher and one classroom, thus classroom teachers play a pivotal role in children's friendships. Elementary students are still learning how to be a student and how to be a friend. Their social lives are still largely teacher- and/or parent-directed (and they are generally okay with this!). Additionally, there is much more social time in elementary school as learning tends to be largely social, and students enjoy free time in class as well as recess, gym and other specials.

Strategies to Promote Friendships in Elementary School

Following are specific strategies that can maximize social opportunities, and thus the chances for friendships to develop, between students with and without disabilities in elementary school.

❯ IN THE CLASSROOM

- Minimize the times that students with disabilities are pulled out of the classroom, especially during student activities that are most designed for connecting with each other (e.g., Morning Meeting, Circle Time). When students with disabilities are pulled out of the classroom, their classmates view them as visitors rather than as peers, and thus, less likely as a potential friend.[66]

- In order to get to know each other and to develop social skills, elementary students need plenty of time to interact with each other under the supervision but not guidance of adults. Consider time in your schedules for partner reading, play centers, problem-solving games, free choice time, and other opportunities for students with and without disabilities to play and learn together.[20]

- A large class size can be intimidating for some students and can be a barrier to their social opportunities. Teachers can address this partly by arranging student desks in small groups; four students with desks pushed together is a good size. Class activities can be designed to require cooperative work in these small groups whenever appropriate. These groupings can be changed every month so that students get to work and socialize with everyone in the class.

- Generally, it is important for friendship development to pay attention to student groups.

  » Try to maximize time together for those who share interests and/or seem interested in each other. However, when students with and without disabilities are always paired together and/or are assumed to be pairs, students without disabilities may feel pressured to do so and may begin to avoid it.[20,37,67] Thus, avoid assigned caretaking roles and look to foster multiple students to spontaneously interact with classmates with disabilities as peers.

  » Additionally, pay attention to the numbers of students in groups. Pairs are often effective as long as they are not always assigned to be together. Two typically developing students with one student with a disability may result in the student with a disability being left out. Thus, groups of four are often the ideal.

- Incorporate the "friendship mindset" (*p. 9*) into your social-emotional learning and anti-bullying curricula (e.g., Open Circle, Responsive Classroom). These existing lessons include social skills and concepts that are important to friendship development, but they do not explicitly address friendships between students with and without disabilities.

- Promote disability awareness and high expectations for students with disabilities by incorporating books with fully developed and integral characters with disabilities into your lessons and class library. There are many appropriate and effective stories from which to choose (e.g., *Dan and Diesel, Featherless/Desplumado, Ian's Walk, Looking after Louis, My Brother Charlie, My Friend Isabelle, Russ and the Almost Perfect Day, Since We're Friends, Susan Laughs, Tomas Loves, What's Wrong with Timmy?*).

- Be on the lookout for students without disabilities interacting as adults (e.g., as teachers or parents) with classmates with disabilities. It is positive that they want to help, but again, friendship is a horizontal relationship not a vertical one. Remind students that they are not teachers. Show them how they can work and play together as peers.

- Avoid speaking about a student with a disability in front of him or her because this can send a wrong message to peers (and the student with a disability!) that promotes vertical rather than horizontal interactions.

- Many elementary teachers call all of their students "friends." This is often a strategy for building a caring and accepting classroom community. However, we urge you to reconsider this usage. It may confuse students about the real meaning of a friend. Moreover, we do not expect all students in a classroom to develop authentic friendships with each other, but we do expect them to be respectful and supportive of one another.

Strategies to Promote Friendships in Elementary School

(CONTINUED)

- Develop a system for sharing contact information that works for your classroom/school. Since children's social lives are still adult-directed, the parents need to be able to get in touch with each other to schedule play dates and social activities. For example, some teachers give out a beginning of the year survey and ask parents what information they want to share with others.

› AT LUNCH AND RECESS

- Encourage all students to eat lunch together and to look out for each other at lunch.

- Encourage all students to not only play together, but to look out for those classmates who may not be included. One excellent strategy being employed at some area schools is the Buddy Bench. In short, students may sit on the bench when they want to join an activity and others will invite them to join when they see them on the bench. You can find an excellent description of this strategy here: https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0A_kcwTbU5Jd1F2LV8tR2J2em8/view

- Teachers can also structure recess participation by establishing daily or weekly "recess buddies" for all students in the class. When only students with disabilities are assigned buddies, it can be stigmatizing or send a wrong message. You may allow students to choose their own recess buddies (e.g., "hands up-pair up"), implement random selection (e.g., with Popsicle sticks), or assign students their buddies. Since recess buddies would be expected to play together, you should teach or model how students should choose what to do at recess (e.g., "5 minutes my idea, 5 minutes your idea").

- In lieu of class-wide recess buddies, teachers may assign two students on a rotating basis to be "recess helpers." All students should have a turn being recess helpers. The designated students monitor the social interactions and opportunities at recess and facilitate positive interactions and inclusion and participation by all. Students will need teacher guidance on being a recess helper as well as listening to the recess helpers.

› PREPARING FOR SOCIAL INTERACTION OPPORTUNITIES

- One of the situations that results in perceiving students with disabilities as "different" is when they are transported to school differently than their typically developing peers. Thus, try to figure out supports and systems so students with disabilities can take the regular transportation just like everyone else. Transportation is a related service under IDEA, and bus monitors and other staff should be part of a student's IEP as appropriate.

- We all want to be appreciated for our unique personalities and qualities. We'd like to think that how we look, how we dress, how we act are not nearly as important as what we're like inside. But making friends often requires "fitting in," even in elementary school. And to fit in, students with disabilities may need to be supported to be as age-and culturally-appropriate as possible without stifling their sense of self. That means:
  - » Dressing in ways acceptable to the times
  - » Carrying the "right" lunch box
  - » Fashionable hair styles may be important.

- Prepare students to use the same language as their peers. This may include explicit instruction, a glossary of social terms, or programming someone's communication device/AAC with current phrases. Ask peers what phrases should be included.

- Students with disabilities may need support in developing social interaction skills. It is effective to practice specific social skills used in the classroom context (e.g., taking turns during a frequently played game, asking to join a popular recess activity, greeting a classmate, returning a greeting, etc.) through role-plays with teachers.[20] We want to also note that students can and should develop friendships and interact with classmates while they are still learning these skills.

Strategies to Promote Friendships in Elementary School

(CONTINUED)

- Use a variety of visual supports (e.g., schedule, social script, pictures of classmates) with students with disabilities during their role-plays, as well as the actual social interactions with classmates.[20] For example, a student might practice asking a classmate to sit at lunch together using a specific social script, be prompted to actually do so using a visual schedule, and choose the classmate by picture. At lunch, they can have a basket with conversation topics and sentence starters to help promote social conversation. If the student struggles with social-emotional reciprocity (e.g., back-and-forth conversation, sharing interests), use specific visual prompts and/or Social Stories™.

- Students without disabilities will also benefit from support in developing social interaction skills. Specific to facilitating friendships between students with and without disabilities, students without disabilities can role-play specific skills they may need to get to know and befriend a classmate with a disability, such as waiting for a response and interacting like a peer and not like a parent or teacher.[20,60] Teachers can model such skills first and then practice them with students without disabilities.

- Elementary school is a critical social period in the sense that it is an opportunity for students to learn social skills and develop friendships prior to what are often unpredictable and challenging social experiences in middle school. As such, elementary teachers should strive to teach typically developing students about disability and inclusion in matter-of-fact ways prior to middle school when social lives are more difficult for all students. As one focus group participant described, "The goal is to have kids think they are more alike than different."

- One common strategy to promote belonging and inclusion has been to invite families (parents or guardians) to the classroom to discuss issues related to their children's disability and inclusion. There are several key considerations related to this strategy.

  » Some families of children with disabilities still want to do this as it can be very helpful for children to see their similarities, learn about disability, and talk about what strategies and supports works. For example, one focus group participant described, "In 1st through 5th grade I went to class every year to explain Down syndrome. Sara was there. I would say, 'You can't catch it. You are born with it. Sara dances, hates broccoli, and loves ice cream. Who else loves ice cream?'"

  » Some families prefer to have their child present when they do this, while some would rather that their child is not in the room. This is a personal decision, but we recommend that the child is present to promote belonging and inclusion.

  » Some families want to visit the classroom, but only if families of all students in the class do it. This approach achieves many of the same outcomes, and is more inclusive in nature as it does not focus only on children with disabilities.

  » Some families choose not to implement this strategy because they feel it can be stigmatizing and they do not want any focus on how their children are different.

My other first graders were very curious—and a little nervous—when Sophie first came through the classroom door with her aide. She didn't talk very much, and when she did her voice was a little strange. She wouldn't look right at the other kids and she twirled and flapped her hands when the class got a little loud and rambunctious (what first grade class doesn't!).

Early on we had a session for the students on "autism," led by a volunteer who is part of our school system's "(Dis)ability Awareness" program. That seemed to help settle the other kids down. Sophie was included with the other students in the 4-desk clusters we use (we change groups every month or so). I "negotiated" with the special education folks to make sure that Sophie was not pulled from the classroom during critical social times, like our morning circle. We made sure that Sophie had at least one buddy when it was time for the less structured lunch and recess periods and taught all the kids how to properly use the playground's "buddy bench." Sophie's aide was at first reluctant, but soon understood my request to "fade" back a bit from Sophie's side, being attentive to Sophie but acting more as an aide for the whole class, not an unusual appendage to just Sophie. Sophie became another valued student in this vibrant class room.

One Friday the girls in the class were buzzing about a birthday party that weekend for one of their class mates. Typical kid talk, but I was wondering if Sophie was going or not. She was still a girl of few words and I did not want to push.

The next Monday morning I had two messages, one from Sophie's Mom and one from the mother of the birthday girl. "Uh oh", I thought. "Something must have happened." And something had.

In the message from the birthday-girl's mother, she said how pleased she was that ALL of her daughter's girl classmates came to the party, including Sophie! She was moved by the way the girls greeted Sophie at the door and immediately involved her in the party activities. She said she thought Sophie had a good time and she knew the other girls enjoyed Sophie's company. As far as she was concerned, this was as important for her daughter's learning as any academic program!

Sophie's mother was similarly moved. This was Sophie's first party invitation from a non-family member, and the Mom was quite nervous. But when they got to the party, she didn't really know what to do when Sophie was whisked away by a gaggle of other 6-7 year olds. And then Sophie's Mom was embraced by a group of mothers who were gathered in the hostess's kitchen while the party "raged." This was one of the few social outings that Sophie's mother had been able to relax at since Sophie was born. She told me that Sophie having friends might help her (the Mom) be less isolated, too.

Supporting all of my students to get along and make connections is one of the most important things I can do. And everyone benefits so much!

-AS TOLD TO JIM ROSS

SOPHIE'S
STORY

A friend to me is someone who will stick by you. Someone who will like you for being you. Also, when you are with a friend you feel free.

-6TH GRADER

"

Section V.
Making Friends in Middle School

ℹ STUDENT
POV

"Friends are a very important part of people's life. They always help you when you need [help] and lean on you when they're sad. A friend will do all things kind if they are your true friends! Friends are fun to do fun stuff with like shop, go to the arcade, and have sleepovers. Friends can help you with bullies. Friends are caring and fantastic and make such a great difference in the world. Friends are like gifts. You get them when you least expect them."

– 6th grader

"A friend to me is someone who will stick by you. Someone who will like you for being you. Someone who will want to play soccer, basketball, and maybe catch with me. A friend is someone that will pick you up when you are down. They don't gossip or talk bad about you. Also, when you are with a friend you feel free."

– 6th grader

Friendships in Middle School

Our focus group participants reinforced findings from much of the literature in clearly stating that social experiences in middle school can be challenging for all students. Students experience a range of physical, social, and emotional changes, and they all respond differently.

The common components of middle school social lives are that students' adult personalities begin to emerge and students turn to their peers more than families.[63] Middle school students are entering **Selman's Level 3** (*see Table 3*) with an awareness of enduring social relationships, thus their social lives are a focus. Early adolescents appear to be similar to their friends in their orientation towards school and their orientation toward contemporary teen culture, which often results in a structure of social cliques.[1,11] Most students are feeling increased levels of peer pressure, and teasing and bullying may be a concern. Specific to friendships between students with and without disabilities, typically developing students may not want to pair up with students with disabilities as much anymore.

Table 3

Selman's Levels of Friendship[64]
(MIDDLE SCHOOL)

LEVEL	Level 2	Level 3
DESCRIPTION	Fair-weather cooperation	Intimate, mutually shared relationships
AGE RANGE	6-12 year-olds	11-15 year-olds
CHARACTERISTICS	There is a new awareness of social relationships. Trust refers to shared expectations of reciprocity and fairness (rather than behaviors only).	Friendships are now viewed as ongoing relationships rather than a series of specific experiences together. Friends recognize mutuality, intimacy, conflict management, and stability in their relationships.

Friendships in Middle School (CONTINUED)

The social context in middle school includes a transition from one teacher and one classroom to multiple teachers and classrooms, often organized in "teams." While middle school students are more aware of and focused on social relationships than elementary school students, there are fewer social times during their school days. Students will likely have a homeroom and likely will not have recess. Additionally, since students are not yet driving, their social lives are still largely directed by parents and teachers. Many students are probably getting smart phones, thus texting and social media become critical components of their social interactions.

In 5th and 6th grade, sports (and other extracurricular activities) are even more of a focus, resulting in busy schedules. In 7th and 8th grade, students experience the full effects of puberty resulting in a range of responses. Some students still tend toward the relative immaturity of 5th/6th grade while others will try to act older. Some are confident enough to maintain relationships and age-appropriate interactions. In particular, 7th grade can be very variable. Following are specific strategies that can maximize social opportunities, and thus the chances for friendships to develop, between students with and without disabilities in middle school.

Strategies to Promote Friendships in Middle School

❯ IN THE CLASSROOM

- When possible, schedule students with and without disabilities who attended the same elementary school, seem interested in each other, or share interests in the same homeroom. Multiple focus group participants described success with this strategy.

- A large class size can be intimidating for some students and can be a barrier to their social opportunities. Teachers can address this partly by arranging student desks in small groups; four students with desks pushed together is a good size. Class activities can be designed to require cooperative work in these small groups whenever appropriate. These groupings can be changed every month or so that students get to work and socialize with everyone in the class.

- Incorporate the "friendship mindset" (*p. 9*) into your social-emotional learning and anti-bullying curricula (e.g., Open Circle, Responsive Classroom). These existing lessons include social skills and concepts that are important to friendship development, but they do not explicitly address friendships between students with and without disabilities.

- Promote disability awareness and high expectations for students with disabilities through a Community Book Chat. There are many compelling stories with fully developed and integral characters with disabilities from which to choose (e.g., *Al Capone Does My Shirts, Ann Drew Jackson, The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night, Freak the Mighty, Jackson Whole Wyoming, Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key, Out of My Mind, Stuck in Neutral, Rules, Tru Confessions*).

- Look for student "alliances" that can be fostered in each classroom and the cafeteria. Students in these alliances can then respond to instances of social exclusion and bullying themselves rather than teachers stepping in. They can also advocate for what the student with a disability needs related to supports and strategies (especially if they were classmates in elementary school). Because students are so peer-focused in middle school, the presence of teachers in social situations can stigmatize students with disabilities and become a barrier to friendship development. As one focus group participant (and middle school teacher) said, "When disability becomes natural, students stick up for each other."

❯ AT LUNCH

- Plan ahead for lunch in middle school. Be proactive in arranging standing lunch dates with others in the same lunch period. Since it can be stressful and challenging for everyone, students without disabilities may also be looking for classmates to eat with. Note, we are not recommending that you start a "lunch bunch." Just let students know where others from their team will be sitting in case they want to sit there.

- Emphasize and maximize social interaction opportunities between students with and without disabilities during the relatively limited social times of the middle school day.[41,68] These include before and after classes, during down time in class, in the hallways during passing periods, lunch, home room, elective classes/specials, and dismissal (e.g., waiting for the bus).

Strategies to Promote Friendships in Middle School

(CONTINUED)

For example, students with disabilities should attend the same lunch as their peers and sit with them, not the adults who support them. In our focus groups and prior research, we still heard of students with disabilities coming to lunch late and sitting at a table on the side with teachers or paraprofessionals only.

- For students who use augmentative and alternative communication methods, be sure to program devices and prompt students for quick greetings and messages during these fleeting social moments at lunch and in the hallway.

> **PREPARING FOR SOCIAL INTERACTION OPPORTUNITIES**

- One of the situations that results in perceiving students with disabilities as "different" is when they are transported to school differently than their typically developing peers. Thus, try to figure out supports and systems so students with disabilities can take the regular transportation just like everyone else. Transportation is a related service under IDEA, and bus monitors and other staff should be part of a student's IEP as appropriate.

- We all want to be appreciated for our unique personalities and qualities. We'd like to think that how we look, how we dress, how we act are not nearly as important as what we're like inside. But making friends, especially for middle school students, often requires "fitting in." And to fit in, students with disabilities may need to be supported to be as age- and culturally-appropriate as possible without stifling their sense of self. That means:

  » Dressing in ways acceptable to the times

  » Fashionable hair styles may be important.

  » Appropriate make-up

  » Having a cell phone

- Prepare students to use the same language as their peers. This may include explicit instruction, a glossary of social terms, or programming someone's communication device/AAC with current phrases. Ask peers what phrases should be included.

- Students have lots of structured activities in their lives, thus they still often need support interacting with each other during unstructured times. Additionally, in middle school especially, there may be lots of perceived risk for typically developing peers to interact with a classmate with a disability. Teachers can and should reduce this risk subtly and naturally through modeling and other strategies that provide necessary information to promote social interaction opportunities.

  » Ask peers what they want to know and tell peers what they need to know…in a matter-of-fact way. Some students with disabilities may appear as if they do not want to interact socially (though most do!), some struggle with social interaction skills (e.g., reading nonverbal cues), and some display disruptive or aggressive behaviors. Others might use specific equipment (e.g., wheelchair, communication device) or have medical needs (e.g., dietary restrictions, gastrostomy tube or g-tube). Their peers need to feel comfortable with these things if they are going to interact socially and develop friendships with them.

  » Because they may be unsure about it, explicitly state to typically developing students that they can and should reach out to their classmates with disabilities. For instance, some students with disabilities gravitate towards adults and older students, and their peers may not recognize the potential to interact with them.

- Pay attention to the technology and social media use (e.g., texting, Facebook, Instagram) by students without disabilities, and support students with disabilities to engage in similar ways as appropriate (and with parental collaboration).

Strategies to Promote Friendships in Middle School

(CONTINUED)

- Start with one typically developing student and others will follow.[41] Especially in middle school, students may need someone to "break the ice" by interacting with a classmate with a disability first. Pull in the typically developing peer who seems interested and/or has parents in the field of special education. His or her example can help others overcome the fear of the unknown.

- Middle school students are experts on the middle school social scene. Do not be afraid to tap into this expertise. One way to do so is to develop a Circle of Support in which interested peers may come together under teacher guidance to brainstorm new strategies for social interaction opportunities. This is similar in some ways to the Peer Network strategy (p. 9), but the focus is much more on problem-solving here. Some of the members of the Circle of Support may become friends, but the focus is really on developing supports and strategies to promote friendship development.

I remember asking Jonathan in elementary school, "Don't you want to have friends?" His response was simply, "No."

JONATHAN'S
STORY

He then elaborated "No thank you, Mommy. I don't want friends. I really don't need them. It's way too hard to have friends!" I asked him why. "I have to say hello, and then I have to say my name, and then I have to tell her something about me and then I have to listen to something about her, and then I have to take turns talking. I get to talk for five minutes and then she gets to talk for five minutes. It's too hard. Besides, why do I even need friends? I have you, and Aunt Mary and Emma!" I realized through this how challenging and how daunting it is for friendships to "just happen."

Over the next year, his 4th grade and transition year to middle school, there was a focus on social skills, kindness and community. Jonathan's classmates have always been open and receptive to Jonathan being in their class, and there were lots of kind interactions and birthday parties. Jonathan did not see his classmates outside of school, but there were always a few that he always would be happy to see when we bumped into them at the playground or local stores! They became "helpers" to Jonathan in school, as I saw it.

Fast forward to end of the school year, I jokingly said to his teacher "I wish I could just have him stay back in fourth grade again." Without realizing that Jonathan overheard me, he ran towards me and yelled "NO you won't, that is not fair! I have worked very hard and I am going to middle school with my friends!" Of course, I reassured him that I was joking. I took a deep breathe knowing that he was going to Middle School with friends, not "helpers," and that he had come a long way in a year! Jonathan got a text from his friend Maya (through mom's phone saying that she hopes they are in the same class in middle school. The next day, Jonathan was so happy to find out he would have the same teacher and texted Maya back telling her the news. This was huge for his transition into a new school. He understood that it would be hard and he might feel nervous, "and it's okay because all the kids are in the same boat as me. Besides, my friends will be there too. I know Maya is in my class and I will get to see Madison because she is on my team!" As he continues to develop and strengthen friendships, I hope that he will continue to gain skills, academically and socially, and achieve everything he sets out to do!

- MAUREEN KING (JONATHAN'S MOTHER)

You must accept my autism as I accept any of your differences. I don't want the association of feeling pity for my life, as I see it as being both full and seemingly lovely, but with challenges and difficulties.

-HS SENIOR

Section VI. Making Friends in High School

Friendships in High School

High school brings several new difficulties to the challenge of friendships between students with and without disabilities. One of the critical barriers to address is that there is typically much less inclusion and much more focus on academics in high school than there was in elementary school and even in middle school. This means that there is much less shared time between potential friends compared to the earlier grades. The high school is typically much larger than the middle school, often with students from multiple feeder middle schools. This also means that a large percentage of the student body will not know some of the students with disabilities and may not be familiar with inclusion. Finally, social lives in high school are now student-directed as many students will have obtained their licenses and will be driving. Unfortunately, their vehicles are likely not going to be accessible to students who use wheelchairs or have other disability-related needs. Sports and other activities may be prominent for many students, thus they will have very busy schedules after school.

However, high school also brings new advantages for friendship development. Many high school students will be more confident in who they are, less susceptible to peer pressure, and less likely to engage in bullying experiences. Moreover, some typically developing peers may be more open to friendships with students with disabilities in high school.[17,41] Thus, there is great potential for increased quantity and improved quality of social interaction opportunities. High school students are largely engaging in mature relationships reflective of **Selman's Levels 3 and 4** (*see Table 4*). Students in 9th and 10th grade may still engage in some middle school behaviors and perspectives, but most 10th-12th graders will have friendships and social interactions that are reflective of those between young adults. Most students will have smartphones, thus their social lives include and are often coordinated by lots of texting and social media use. Finally, transitioning to high school from middle school and transitioning from high school into adulthood can be stressful times for all students, but they also represent significant opportunities for students with and without disabilities to interact socially and support each other. Existing relationships from middle school can provide support systems and be strengthened in high school. Students may be more likely to join clubs and eat lunch together when they feel that they do not know as many of their peers in high school.

Table 4

Selman's Levels of Friendship[64]
(HIGH SCHOOL)

LEVEL	Level 3	Level 4
DESCRIPTION	Intimate, mutually shared relationships	Mature friendship
AGE RANGE	11-15 year-olds	12 year-olds-adulthood
CHARACTERISTICS	Friendships are now viewed as ongoing relationships rather than a series of specific experiences together. Friends recognize mutuality, intimacy, conflict management, and stability in their relationships.	Friendships are based on emotional closeness, trust, and support. Friends recognize that they each have their own needs and wants and learn to balance friendships with other social demands. Friends remain close despite separations.

Strategies to Promote Friendships in High School

Following are specific strategies that can maximize social opportunities, and thus the chances for friendships to develop, between students with and without disabilities in high school.

- Starting high school can be a difficult transition for all students, as one focus group participant (a 9th grader) described: "I don't know half the people in my classes. I just know my friends and classmates from middle school. There are smaller groups and activities in middle school. In high school it's just about school work. There's no way for us to get to know [students with disabilities]." Look for ways to support and connect all students during the beginning of the year. Build on existing connections from middle school and support students to get to know each other (e.g., introductory activities, ice-breakers, etc.).

- When possible, schedule students with and without disabilities who attended the same elementary or middle school, seem interested in each other, or share interests in the same homeroom, free periods, or elective courses. Multiple focus group participants, as well as prior research, indicated success with this strategy.[41] For instance, a high school special education teacher paired up a high school student without disabilities with a fellow senior with autism to be his math tutor during a free period. However, the student with autism excelled in math so he ended up helping his peer with her homework and then they hung out chatting the rest of the time. Eventually, they became friends, ate lunch together, and went to the movies and the zoo on weekends.

- Promote disability awareness and high expectations for students with disabilities through a book club or research assignment. There are many compelling autobiographies and memoirs by individuals with disabilities and their family members (e.g., *Autobiography of a Face, Choosing Naia, The Diving Bell and the Butterfly, Emergence: Labeled Autistic, Look me in the Eye: My Life with Asperger's, Passing for Normal: A Memoir of Compulsion, Riding the Bus with My Sister*).

- Students with disabilities may have developed learned helplessness by high school due to the types and amounts of adult support over the years. Be aware of this. High school students with disabilities will engage in much more communication and social interaction when they are included with their peers and when they have a purpose (e.g., participate in cooperative group work in an academic class, work in the school store, or have a valued role on a school team or club).

- If the high school has a Diversity Club, ensure that it includes disability as part of diversity and has students with disabilities in the club! In fact, there are many positive social opportunities when a special education teacher becomes faculty advisor to such a club.[41] If the high school does not have a Diversity Club, start one.

- High school students with disabilities should join interest-based clubs and extracurricular activities, and they should attend them with classmates (not adults) whenever possible. There are many ways to be involved in the activity you like, though you may need to be creative. There is no need to create "special" activities or clubs.

- Look for inclusive sports and physical activities (e.g., inclusive dance group, outing club) after school as well as in the community. Shared experiences on a team or as a group, especially those that include physical activity, naturally lead to social interactions and connections.

- Plan ahead for lunch in high school. Be proactive in arranging standing lunch dates with others in the same lunch period. Support students with and without disabilities to eat lunch together.

- One issue that may arise is that lunch for some high school students without disabilities is predominantly social, thus they eat quickly, if at all. As one focus group participant described, "Lunch is 20 minutes. You can either eat or talk to friends." This may not work well for some students with disabilities who need to eat a full lunch or who eat slowly. Consider a range of individualized strategies to maximize social interaction opportunities with whatever needs to happen regarding lunch. For example, you may program a communication device or prompt a student to greet a classmate and have a quick discussion during the first few minutes of lunch and then allow the remaining time for actually eating.

Strategies to Promote Friendships in High School

(CONTINUED)

- Emphasize/maximize social interaction opportunities between students with and without disabilities during the relatively limited social times of the high school day.[41,68] These include before and after classes, during down time in class, in the hallways during passing periods, lunch, homeroom, free periods, elective courses, dismissal (e.g., waiting for the bus), after school, and extracurricular activities. For example, students with disabilities should attend the same lunch as their peers and sit with them, not the adults who support them. In our focus groups and prior research, we still heard of students with disabilities coming to lunch late and sitting at a table on the side with teachers or paraprofessionals only.

- For students who use augmentative and alternative communication methods, be sure to program devices and prompt students for quick greetings and messages during these fleeting social moments at lunch and in the hallway.

❯ PREPARING FOR SOCIAL INTERACTION OPPORTUNITIES

- Figure out the transportation and accessibility needs of students with disabilities. Since many high school students are driving their own vehicles, friendship supports may include problem-solving to allow students with disabilities to ride with their peers to and from school, a sporting event, or play practice.

- We all want to be appreciated for our unique personalities and qualities. We'd like to think that how we look, how we dress, how we act are not nearly as important as what we're like inside. But making friends in high school often requires "fitting in." And to fit in, students with disabilities may need to be supported to be as age- and culturally-appropriate as possible without stifling their sense of self. That means:

  » Dressing in ways acceptable to the times

  » Fashionable hair styles may be important

  » Appropriate make-up

  » Having a cell phone

- Prepare students to use the same language as their peers. This may include explicit instruction, a glossary of social terms, or programming someone's communication device/AAC with current phrases. Ask peers what phrases should be included.

- Start with one typically developing student and others will follow.[41] Even high school students may need someone to "break the ice" by interacting with a classmate with a disability first. Pull in the typically developing peer who seems interested and/or has parents in the field of special education. His or her example can help others overcome the fear of the unknown or just be a positive example of potential friendship. As one high school senior described, "I mean, I can understand like it would be tough, like, if they go up, and obviously when you first say something to Shaffer [a student with autism] he doesn't respond immediately, so, I think it's just difficult for other people to realize that he can communicate."

- Explicitly state to typically developing students that they can and should reach out to their classmate with a disability. Even high school students have described not knowing how to interact with a peer with a disability or not knowing that they could (often due to adult proximity to the student with a disability).

- Teach peers how to engage in "friendship work".[60] Because some students with disabilities may struggle to initiate and/or engage in social interactions, their peers without disabilities may need to provide various supports in order for them to spend time together socially. Some examples of friendship work include initiating conversations or activities together, providing necessary prompts in the moment (e.g., a calming touch on the shoulder or a verbal reminder to tell the waiter what they want for dinner), and waiting for responses from students with disabilities (i.e., being patient). Another example from some focus group participants was asking their friend with Down syndrome, "Is that what you wanted to happen or what actually happened?" when she told a story that may or may not have actually happened in efforts to fit in.

Strategies to Promote Friendships in High School

(CONTINUED)

- Pay attention to the technology and social media use (e.g., texting, Facebook, Instagram) by students without disabilities, and support students with disabilities to engage in similar ways as appropriate (and with parental collaboration). Our focus group participants who were in high school told us that friends frequently text each other to just come over and hang out in the moment. How often are students with disabilities able to engage in such a social interaction?

- Consider developing either a Circle of Support or a Peer Network (p. 9), or both. Beyond their expertise on the high school social scene, high school students typically will want to include and support their classmates with disabilities. Teachers should thus remind them to interact reciprocally (i.e., horizontally) as peers rather than as helpers or caretakers (i.e., vertically).

It all started in middle school. Every Friday a group of us in homeroom played cards. From the start the three of us bonded; we were inseparable.

While playing one of our favorite card games, "Aruba", Aly and Sam were always on the same team competing against Ryan Rose. She was always trying to beat us! We loved playing together and always wanted to continue playing after homeroom ended. Mrs. Jean, the school psychologist, noticed our bond and asked Aly and Ryan Rose if we wanted to help Sam improve her social skills. Of course we wanted to help out our friend! That's when Sam came up with the idea to hang out that weekend. Our shared bond of playing cards made us want to hang out more and more. The first time we hung out we jumped on Sam's trampoline for hours, laughing and making jokes. We didn't want the fun to end. After that, we took a painting class, made brownies, played ping pong, and went to see "Finding Dory" at the movie theater. As our friendship grew stronger we have helped Sam with her "Buddy Bench" video and attended the opening ceremony at [the elementary school] when Sam cut open the ribbon for the bench.

SAM, ALY, & RYAN ROSE'S STORY

Even through our first year of high school, the three of us stayed close; every Day 3 of our schedule the three of us have lunch together. We gossip about boys, clubs, and sports teams. We also help each other with the struggles we have at the high school and brainstormed ways to improve them. Over the years our friendship has benefited one another. Ryan Rose and Aly are learning so much from this experience. They have matured greatly from this and gained a great friend! Also, Sam said, "Aly and Ryan Rose are good role models to me. They are great listeners and are honest with me. They understand when I make a mistake and support me through it. They forgive me and help me change my behavior." The three of us hope to continue our friendship through high school and improve each day!

-SAM, ALY, AND RYAN ROSE

I feel I've grown a lot as a person since I've been living on the BSU campus. Not only have I gotten to know many new people, this has also been a great opportunity to further my independence.

-COLLEGE STUDENT

Section VII. Making Friends in College

ⓘ ONLINE RESOURCES

For more information about ICEI and college opportunities, visit these sites:

- mass.gov/edu/birth-grade-12/higher-education/initiatives-and-special-programs/inclusive-concurrent-enrollment/bridgewater-state-university-icei-residence-life-pilot.html

- mass.gov/edu/birth-grade-12/higher-education/initiatives-and-special-programs/inclusive-concurrent-enrollment.

- thinkcollege.net

More and more students with intellectual and developmental disabilities who are 18 and older now have the opportunity to attend college.

For instance, the Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative (ICEI) offers grants to college-school partnerships in Massachusetts to support eligible public high school students with intellectual disabilities, ages 18-22, to increase their academic and career success by being included in a college or university community of learners. Students with disabilities attend classes (and other activities) at the school with their fellow students without disabilities. It is offered in various 4-year and community colleges around the state. Most ICEI programs are for day students only, but Bridgewater State University began piloting a residence life model in Fall 2016. For more information about ICEI go to http://www.mass.gov/edu/birth-grade-12/higher-education/initiatives-and-special-programs/inclusive-concurrent-enrollment.

Additional information about college opportunities can be found at http://www.thinkcollege.net. *Think College* is a national organization dedicated to developing, expanding, and improving inclusive higher education options for people with intellectual disability. Think College is a project of the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

No matter what avenue to college may be chosen, there are several strategies that can maximize social opportunities, and thus the chances for friendships to develop, between students with and without disabilities. **They include:**

Strategies for College Students:

- Students with and without disabilities should share learning experiences and down time in the same classes.

- Clearly identify the strengths/gifts of the students with disabilities and share them with others. For instance, a student with a disability may have a real talent with technology; less tech-savvy students could benefit from this expertise. This could then lead to increased time spent together.

- Speaking of technology, be sure that it's used to help—not hinder--students to make connections. For instance, receiving reminder texts about meet-up times for activities may be a real benefit for some students.

- Actively involve students with disabilities in school activities in which they have an interest and/or talent. Shared interests are the basis of most friendships. Many colleges and universities have club sports (sometimes including quidditch!), radio stations, chess clubs, theater and chorus groups, film viewer and film-maker clubs, fitness centers (with a wide variety of activities), art clubs, robotics, and outing clubs (hiking, camping, fishing, etc.). There is almost always a possible match between interests and opportunities.

- The larger community (outside the college or university) may also offer opportunities to connect with peers. College students may find community choruses, theater groups, YM/WCAs, churches, and other organizations that are likely to be welcoming and social.

- Look for internships and jobs, on- or off-campus. Friendships are often made in the workplace. (*See "Building friendships at Work" at* http://thearcofmass.org/building-friendships-at-work-toolkit).

- Similarly, look for opportunities to volunteer on- or off-campus (e.g., Meals-on-Wheels, Big Brother/Big Sister, political organizations). Working together toward a common goal can foster social connections.

- Utilize other students in support roles when possible. For instance, some students with disabilities may need note-takers or tutors or study partners. Although those roles are different than friendships, friendships may develop from the relationships that begin in these capacities.

- Another support role for other students some have found useful is that of a "social coordinator." Social coordinators let students with disabilities know about any and all upcoming social opportunities. Thus, if there is a concert or a big game or a holiday party most students will attend, students with disabilities will also know about it. Again, the social coordinator is not a friend, though friendships may certainly develop.

- Pay special attention to mealtimes. "Breaking bread" together can be one of the most intimate and important times that people spend together, helping with bonding and friendship. Be sure that no one is left alone.

Strategies for College Students Living on Campus:

- Students with disabilities should live in the same dorms as students without disabilities.

- Survey the interests of the other students in the dorm and then encourage connections between those who share interests.

- Survey the students to see who shares hometowns or lives near each other. Sharing rides to and from schools may lead to deeper connections. These connections may continue during school breaks or even when college is completed.

- Peer Mentors and Residence Aides (RAs) should be oriented to the needs of their fellow students with disabilities. This orientation should include information and strategies to promote social opportunities and support social connections between students with and without disabilities.

Rob is a typical college student in what he likes to do on campus: going to the cafeteria for lunch with his friends, exercising at the gym, doing his homework, and checking his email at the campus library.

This year he also went to the homecoming football game and several theatre productions. Rob would tell you, however, that the best part is the classes. Rob has completed a variety of undergraduate classes at Bridgewater State University including: Introduction to Acting, Creative Dramatics, Introduction to Public Speaking, Theatre Appreciation, World History to 1500, Drawing 1, Multimedia Storytelling, Play Production and Jazz, Pop and Show Choir. Rob has also had the opportunity to participate in several job internships on campus.

Rob is part of the state-funded Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative (ICEI) that offers public high school students with significant disabilities, ages 18-22, who have not passed MCAS, the opportunity to participate in inclusive college courses (credit or non-credit). Rob's support on campus is provided by the ICEI program in collaboration with the Building Futures Project of The Nemasket Group (https://nemasketgroup.org).

Rob acknowledges that going to college has helped prepare him for the future. Jim (Rob's Dad), has also noticed the changes: "The program has been phenomenal for Rob…he has an older brother and has always wanted to do what his brother did. This program has allowed him to do this at the University level. Rob has grown immensely. His confidence has blossomed, he is more independent, and he looks you in the eye when he speaks now. He has been able to express himself much better, and has taken control of conversations and opportunities and friendships." Rob is a true member of the Bridgewater student community.
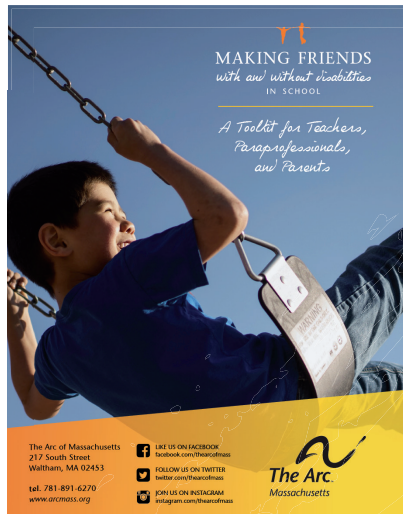
**- ADAPTED FROM ROSS HOOLEY,
THE NEMASKET GROUP**

ROB'S
STORY

Section VIII. Conclusion

THE TOOLKIT

This Toolkit includes many strategies to promote friendships between students with and without disabilities.

The strategies emphasize maximizing social opportunities that can lead to the development of friendships.

Ultimately, we want students with and without disabilities to share motivating and authentic experiences together because friendships are more likely to develop when students get to know each other and enjoy their time together.

Despite widespread awareness of the importance of friendship, students with and without disabilities still infrequently develop friendships, even in inclusive settings.

We feel strongly that all students can and should develop friendships, including those students with the most significant support needs. Even while students may be working on specific social interaction skills, teachers (and families) can create contexts in which students experience a greater quantity and higher quality of social interaction opportunities. Teachers can systematically enact purposeful and individualized strategies to address this challenge of friendship.

Because it is not realistic to expect to solve this challenge immediately, we recommend that teachers start by considering the ways they may adopt the "friendship mindset." Then, choose one strategy to increase the quantity of social interaction opportunities and one strategy to improve the quality of social interaction opportunities.

Let's all work together to move from social acceptance and daily greetings to meaningful interactions and authentic friendships for students with and without disabilities.

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