



Fact Sheet

Facilitating Friendships and Interactions

Developing relationships with others is important for any individual. Individuals with disabilities, especially severe disabilities, may frequently have fewer friends and fewer interactions with peers than do individuals without disabilities. In order for interactions to occur with peers without disabilities and ultimately to have friendships develop, it may be necessary for parents and teachers to facilitate interactions between students with and without disabilities. It is insufficient simply to have students with disabilities physically placed in classrooms with their nondisabled peers. It is likely that individuals with and without disabilities will need ideas for ways in which to interact with one another. This section provides strategies that parents, teachers, and others can implement to facilitate interactions between individuals with and without disabilities.

Facilitating friendships and interactions between peers can involve several strategies:

1. Provide opportunities that help to bring students together (e.g., class activities). Encourage students to work together on class assignments and in “special classes” such as art, music, library and so forth. Encourage “buddy systems” for school activities as well as activities before and after school.
2. Present the individual with disabilities to others in a positive manner. Have the student with disabilities share, independently or through adaptations, his/her special interests or talents with the class. This will enable students to view the student with disabilities as a competent individual and as a peer with his or her own interests.
3. Work to ensure that the student’s peers understand how best to communicate with the student with a disability. It may be important to teach the peers how to use sign language, picture systems, etc. so to promote meaningful conversations between the involved students.
4. Make adaptations in the environment to provide full access and help involve the individual with disabilities in meaningful ways. Avoid seating the student with disabilities on the periphery of activities/class. Make adaptations to classroom activities, instructions, and materials as needed. For example, does the student require braille, large print, magnification devices, listening devices, sign language etc. in order to fully participate in the classroom activities.
5. Use the classroom curriculum to teach about diversity, equality, and friendships. Discuss similarities and differences among students in the classroom. The classroom teacher may facilitate discussions regarding concerns, fears, and questions that may arise pertaining to friendships with students with disabilities. Ask peers to assist in planning strategies for facilitating friendships with students with disabilities.

5. Use teaching methodologies that encourage cooperation among students and expect the student with disabilities to participate in class activities with his/her peers. Give the student with disabilities valued roles in cooperative learning groups.
6. Minimize adult presence as much as possible so that the adult does not interfere with interactions between the students.
7. As the teacher, demonstrate acceptance of and positive interactions with the student. Students typically imitate the behaviors that they see modeled by their teacher. Avoid the use of juvenile language when talking with the student with disabilities.
8. Provide encouragement and praise when students participate in positive interactions with one another.
9. Respond to challenging behaviors in a manner that teaches peers positive social or coping skills.

Adapted from Schaffner, C.B., & Buswell, B.E. (1992). Connecting students: A guide to thoughtful friendship facilitation for educators and families. Colorado Springs: PEAK Parent Center)

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Fact Sheets from the Colorado Services to Children and Youth with Combined Vision and Hearing Loss Project are to be used by both families and professionals serving individuals with vision and hearing loss. The information applies to children, birth through 21 years of age. The purpose of the Fact Sheet is to give general information on a specific topic. More specific information for an individual student can be provided through personalized technical assistance available from the project. For more information call (303) 866-6681 or (303) 866-6605. Updated: 11/09

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