

# The Key to Friendship

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Friendship plays an important role in everyone's life. When a person has no friends, his life span is significantly reduced. Experts agree that friendship is not a luxury, it is essential to life. Despite this fact, the social networks and intimate relationships of people with disabilities are substantially smaller than the social networks of people without disabilities. These community engagement patterns have only recently been examined using "Community Engagement" surveys and this information is displayed at the website, [www.buildingsocialcapital.org](http://www.buildingsocialcapital.org). Most relationships are limited to family members, acquaintances with disabilities and people who are paid to interact with them.

People with disabilities often have unique barriers that prevent them from developing and maintaining friendships. Often, however, it is thought that the person with a disability or their family must change or do things differently to fit in. In reality, the changes that need to happen are with those around the person with a disability. Rather, the challenge needs to be on the creative leader to incorporate strategies for promoting friendship.

Friendship usually develops out of mutual interests and common goals. Real friendship possesses virtues, loyalty and trust and offers help in time of need. Friendship does not just bring you happiness; it makes you a better person. Above all, friendship encourages a sense of belonging and connectedness.

All of these realities are confirmed in studies conducted over the past 50 years in looking at what sociologists call "social capital." In fact, the term, and use of the word "capital" are strategic to conveying how valuable our relationships are in our lives. Quite simply studies have shown that people who have more and steady social capital are healthier, happier, more confident, achieve more, and, in fact, live longer.

So if your group or center is committed to including people of all abilities, it is critical to think strategically about how to promote friendships. Friendship makes people feel that they are part of a community and contributes significantly to the health and safety of everyone. Creating an environment that is conducive to fostering friendships and bringing people with and without disabilities together benefits the entire community.

***Benefits for people with disabilities:***

- Greater sense of belonging
- Broadened opportunities
- Increased social skills
- Increase self-esteem

***Benefits for people without disabilities:***

- Heightened understanding acceptance, compassion and tolerance for diversity
- Decreased anxiety and increased confidence in their ability to learn new ways of solving social challenges
- Increased ability to respond with confidence and understanding to peers who may look or sound or think differently

***Benefits for people with and without disabilities:***

- Expanding lifelong skills
- Encouraging friendships
- Creating a sense of belonging
- Enhancing personal growth
- Improving life skills and youthful development

So what can groups or community centers do to promote friendship among all people?  
In general, we can:

- Include community members of all abilities
- Educate staff (if relevant) and have available support if needed
- Ensure accessibility in both structure and attitude
- Encourage all people to be involved to their fullest potential
- Make friendship development a priority
- Provide an environment that is conducive to friendship development.

Oftentimes, we take the process of crating friendships for granted. For many of us, the skills required in developing friendships come naturally, or over many years of being in community settings. A person with a disability often needs to be supported through this process. The steps outlined below will help you think strategically about how to assist a person with a disability in forming friendships.

**Get to know the person with a disability**

***What are his/her passions or interests?***

Friendships typically grow and develop through shared interests. Identifying mutual interests can be critical in helping to create a bond with another person.

### ***What are his/her strengths?***

It is important to know an individual's strengths in order to capitalize on them. By being able to point out her strengths, you will allow others to see the person with a disability in a different light. Not as someone with limitations, but as a person who has a contribution to make.

### **What are his/her limitations?**

It is also important to be familiar with a person's limitations in order to support him in participating fully in activities as well as in developing friendships. For example, if you know that he has difficulty remembering dates, it will be important to remind him of a friend's birthday. Located in the resource section of this booklet is a checklist titled, "Starting a Conversation," which is a useful tool to use when getting to know someone with a disability. Keep in mind that these questions are only to be used as a guideline for a *conversation* to aid in exploring a person's passions, interests, strengths and limitations. Your goal should be to get to know the person and make him feel comfortable and welcomed.

### **Analyze the environment**

#### ***What activities/services will the person with a disability want to access?***

Now that you are familiar with the person, you can identify the activities and services that he or she may be interested in accessing. Remember, it is important to choose activities that provide an opportunity for socialization.

#### ***What types of modifications/adaptations/support will need to be provided?***

It is imperative to success that you closely examine a meeting, group or activity in order to determine how best to support a person with a disability in fully participating. By comparing the demands of the activity to the strengths and needs of the person, you will help ensure a successful experience. Located in the resources section of this booklet are instructions on how to perform an "Activity Analysis," which can be a useful tool when determining the kind of support a person may need.

### **Identify a Proactive Gatekeeper**

A proactive gatekeeper is an existing member of a group who will help to welcome a new member. The endorsement of a gatekeeper is essential in making a new member feel accepted into a group. Consider the groups and clubs that you have joined over

the years. Think about a person who made you feel welcomed and introduced you to other people. Following are some characteristics of a proactive gatekeeper.

- They tend to be optimistic. They genuinely like people and look for the good in everyone they meet.
- They are social risk takers. They reach out to the underdog and will endure criticism if need be.
- They reach out to new things and are curious and interested in how, why and why not.
- They tend to be younger people who are not set in their ways.
- More often than not, they tend to be women. Men are usually more conservative and become more easily set in their ways.
- They are very sociable and tend to be good mixers.
- They tend to have respect and influence in their community.
- They tend to be more creative and flexible.

Located in the resource section of this booklet is an exercise entitled, “Are you a Positive Gatekeeper?” This exercise can help you to identify positive gatekeepers who you should utilize when welcoming a new person into your center.

### **Encouraging Friendships**

Finding a gatekeeper is a key first step in helping someone who may seem different because of their disability to become accepted. But, we now want to take it a step further and think about ways that you can encourage friendships.

- Set goals that promote cooperation and encourage members to support and assist one another rather than compete against one another. An example of this type of activity would be organizing a group to plan a party or a festival. This type of activity promotes social interaction and encourages the participants to work together toward a common goal.
- Find opportunities for members to interact one-on-one with the person who has a disability. This may make other members more eager to get to know him.
- Study the interactions between group members and restructure the group to promote positive social interactions. This means that when you observe a group, take note of who the key players (the people with the most influence) are within

that group. Also, observe the cliques that have formed within the group and the group members who are being ignored. Then think about how you can restructure the group to break up cliques and promote interactions among the key players and the members of the group who have been rejected (Schlein, 1997).

- Encourage all people to be involved to their full potential and to “show up regularly.” If a person with a disability is visible to others, it portrays a sense of interest and commitment. Let him know you want him to come back!
- Conduct staff orientation and meetings to emphasize valuing differences and respecting others. Train staff to recognize natural opportunities that can foster relationships.
- Integrate supports in the least separating manner. As much as possible, don't make the individual feel as though they stand out. Provide supports when necessary, but know when to back off.
- Create an environment where everyone feels accepted, valued and respected.
- Develop opportunities for participants to interact with same-age peers, regardless of ability.
- Capitalize on commonalities among group members. If you know that two parents have children who are the same age, put them together during a small group activity.

- Think about ways to encourage socialization during all activities. For example, if people are introducing themselves at the beginning of a group, have each member share something about himself.

### **Fostering Friendships**

By incorporating these strategies into the activities of your group or center, you will create an atmosphere that is conducive to friendship development. It is important to take notice of a blossoming friendship in order to help support the individual with a disability in nurturing it.

Communication is often a barrier that can preclude friendship development for people with disabilities. Helping a person with a disability to communicate effectively may require very deliberate preparation and instruction.

- For individuals who use a communication device, you may need to spend time helping her prepare for conversations. If you are unfamiliar with communication devices, you can often enlist the help of a family or support person. It may be helpful if the person using the device prepares a script that tells people a little about herself as a way to initiate conversations.
- For individuals who have difficulty with social situations, it may be helpful to use a role-play activity as a way to prepare for social situations.
- You can help the individual rehearse conversations about his hobbies or interests. You can then take it a step further and create an opportunity for him to interact with someone who shares the same interests.
- Remember that non-verbal communication is just as important as verbal communication. When working on social skills, emphasize the importance of maintaining eye contact and using appropriate facial expressions and gestures.
- Observe the individual in social situations and provide feedback. Emphasize the positive feedback and use negative social interactions as a teaching opportunity. Friendships are reciprocal. It is assumed that friends can place certain demands

on one another and be assured of a response. It is important to help an individual with a disability in being a friend by helping him make phone calls, send greeting cards and extend social invitations. Oftentimes, it is a matter of deliberately creating opportunities for friends to interact. Chances to get together with friends are frequently limited for people with disabilities because of transportation restrictions, limited finances and the need for attendant care. Think about social opportunities, in which people with disabilities can easily participate, that you can help to create at your center or in your community.

It is not possible to “mandate” friendships. However, ***it is possible to create opportunities for people with and without disabilities to meet and spend time with one another in ways that encourage friendships to take root and flourish.*** It is essential that community groups or centers think about the many ways to facilitate these opportunities.

This document is part of a series developed by CLASS

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