Quarterly Newsletter

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Friendship Inclusion

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School provides an opportunity for students of all ages and abilities to learn critical social skills in structured and unstructured environments. Making friends at school is critical for students to develop connections, empathy, and lifelong social skills. Friendships are critical for building mental health and self-worth. Friendships for students with low-incidence disabilities do not always come naturally or easily. Barriers that inhibit friendship progression include limited physical accessibility, alternative communication methods, and a lack of inclusive social activities, which often lead to misunderstanding and stigma. Sometimes our students require teacher facilitation to develop inclusive friendships.

Communication Barrier: Building relationships with students who use AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) and those who do not requires careful planning. Teachers can facilitate this process by modeling social interactions with students who are AAC users in academic and social settings, such as lunch, recess, or other social activities, based on the student's age; teaching selected peers who are patient and understanding how to initiate and reciprocate conversations with AAC users. Patience is key because creating a message with AAC is slower than using verbal speech, and having a patient and understanding communication partner can build the AAC user's self-confidence to participate in social interactions. Teachers can choose a specific activity, such as lunch, for the AAC user to practice reciprocal social interactions. Starting with one facilitated social activity, the trained peers will help the AAC user and the peers to develop understanding and confidence to communicate with one another.

Physical Accessibility Barrier: Some students may have physical limitations; however, this does not mean that the environment should limit them from fully participating with their peers at school. For example, for students who use a wheelchair to transport themselves throughout school, there should be a clear pathway and space at a lunch table for them to sit with their peers. Selecting a peer or peers who understand your student's physical mobility needs is another way to overcome the lack of physical accessibility and is a way to teach the peers empathy and patience for individuals who may require accommodations to be mobile, not just at school, but in other environments. Another setting to help build friendship is extracurricular activities, such as team sports or games. Picking games that can be adapted to accommodate the physical needs will help include and engage our students with low-incidence disabilities.

Disability Education and Awareness: Educating school staff and students on inclusion and disability awareness is critical to help support our students with low-incidence disabilities. This is beneficial to students of any age to be educated about disabilities to develop the skills of including students with low-incidence disabilities in social interactions at school and in their community. The school team should consider the age and comprehension when planning their educational awareness of low-incidence disabilities and breaking the stigma. Younger elementary students would benefit from literacy that addresses differences and how the characters are included and celebrated. For older students and even for school staff, bringing in a person who is a self-advocate who wants to share their story of the challenges they faced developing friendships at school and in the community.

Friendship inclusion for students with low-incidence disabilities in all social opportunities provides them with opportunities to communicate and form connections with their peers, develop self-confidence to participate in activities with peers, and feel part of their school community. In turn, peers and school staff expand their communication skills, become creative and flexible thinkers to include everyone in participating, and provide a welcoming, diverse friendship environment.

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