Quarterly Newsletter

October 2026

Building Positive Relationships for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students

By Abby Steer, Deaf and Hard of Hearing Specialist

Friendships are an important part of every student's social-emotional development, but D/deaf and hard of hearing students can face barriers to building and maintaining relationships with peers. Background noise, missed conversations, difficulty following fast-paced group discussions, and limited access to incidental social learning can make it harder to join activities, understand social cues, and feel included. These challenges do not mean students lack the desire or ability to form meaningful friendships; they highlight the importance of creating accessible opportunities for connection.

Because of this, it is imperative to support positive peer relationships. Strategies can include:

Explicitly teach social and conversational skills

- Model how to initiate conversations, take turns, repair communication breakdowns, and invite others to join activities.

Provide structured opportunities for interaction.

- Use cooperative learning, small-group activities, peer buddy programs, and shared-interest clubs to encourage meaningful connections.

Create communication-accessible environments

- Reduce background noise, ensure students have visual access to speakers, and encourage one person to speak at a time.

Teach peers effective communication strategies.

- Help classmates understand how to communicate respectfully, include DHH students in conversations, and check for understanding.

Provide appropriate communication supports.

- Ensure access to interpreters and other individualized communication supports as needed.

Foster an inclusive classroom culture.

- Promote acceptance, respect, and a sense of belonging so that all students feel valued and included.

Encourage authentic friendships

- Give students consistent opportunities to communicate, participate in shared activities, discover common interests, and get to know one another.

References:

Foster Belonging for Deaf Students on Your Campus by the National Deaf Center

Supporting the Social–Emotional Well-Being of Elementary School Students Who Are Deaf and Hard of Hearing: A Pilot Study