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Helping Children with Disabilities Develop and Maintain Friendships

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Abstract: *Friends are important in the lives of most people. Unfortunately, children with disabilities, particularly those with more severe disabilities, frequently face considerable problems in friendship development. In this article, we describe friendship development between children with and without disabilities and present strategies for teachers and school counselors working with children with disabilities in a broad range of settings.*

The ability to share one's life and connect emotionally through friendship is consistently reported as a critical factor in the development and maintenance of life satisfaction. Friendship has been examined in terms of quantity of friends, quality of relationships as well as peer acceptance. It is also evident that how children define and interpret friendship changes over time (Grenot-Scheyer, 1994). According to Freeman and Kasari (1998, p. 343), "friendship is a social relationship based on interactions that are reciprocal, stable and serve the functions of intimacy, companionship, emotional support, and affection." Due to the general nature of friendship, it is both individually created and sustained. Reciprocity at some level appears to be a most critical factor (Lutfiyya, 1991; Zajac & Hartup, 1997).

The impact of disability on relationship development has been discussed for years. Persons with disabilities frequently experience interactional difficulties due to stigma associated with disability (Goffman, 1963; Stephens & Clark, 1987). Early research suggested that one underlying cause of this discomfort relates to the formation of "interaction strain" (Davis, 1961; Evans, 1976). Interaction strain pertains to the feelings of

unease, discomfort and uncertainty those without disabilities develop when encountering persons with disabilities which hinder relationship development. Others such as Weinberg (1976) and Goffman (1963) reported negative thoughts and evaluations of persons with disabilities as the source of interactional problems. According to Weinberg (1976), persons with disabilities are perceived to lack both adequate social skills and the qualities that a liked person possesses. Despite the uncertainty of the actual source of negative attitudes toward persons with disabilities, their impact has been considerable. Particular concern relates to the impact of these attitudes on the friendship development of children with disabilities. Beyond the initial encounter, friendship also depends on the ability to sustain a relationship. Disability specific problems such as language and cognitive limitations may further impede relationship growth between children with and without disabilities (Freeman & Kasari, 1998).

Although friendship has been frequently examined by studies looking at typical children's development (Doll, 1996; Rizzo & Corsaro, 1995; Rosenblatt & Howes, 1995), few studies have examined the friendship de-

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velopment patterns of children with disabilities and/or chronic health conditions (Freeman & Kasari, 1998; Grenot-Scheyer, 1994). Although research readily acknowledges the negative life implications of having few or no friends, particularly for children and adults with disabilities, limited discussion has focused on friendship as a process of skill development. The purpose of this article was to examine factors that are essential for the development of friendships in childhood and their implications when working with children with disabilities. Particular emphasis was placed on the development of social skills appropriate to the developmental stage of the child. Strategies regarding friendship development with children with disabilities within a range of settings are discussed. In addition, suggestions are provided for regular education teachers, special education teachers, and other school personnel in order to promote friendships among children at different developmental periods.

Importance of Friendship

The importance of friends in the lives of children and adolescents can not be over-emphasized. According to Hartup (1992, p. 1), "the single best predictor of adult adaptation is not school grades, and not classroom behavior, but rather, the adequacy with which the child gets along with other children." Friendship evolves from a mutual decision for an association and is intrinsically motivated (Green, Schleien, Mactavish, & Benepe, 1995). In addition, friendships provide a feeling of trust and loyalty (Zajac & Hartup, 1997). As noted by Doll (1996, p. 165), "having friends and being friends are defining moments of childhood." Friendship has been associated with cognitive and emotional development (Hartup, 1992), positive social behaviors (Kemple, 1992), moral development (Asher & Williams, 1996), and the ability to be both cooperative (Zajac & Hartup, 1992) and competitive within social relationships.

Friendships are an avenue for social skill development and serve as a foundation for future relationships (Hartup, 1992). Rosenblatt and Howes (1995) suggest that as children mature and develop new skills, they

may also develop new strategies for forming relationships. In addition, friendship has been associated with assisting learning; friends may learn together better than non-friends because they know each other better and are more committed to helping each other be successful (Zajac & Hartup, 1997).

The negative impact of having few or no friends during childhood has also been investigated. Rejection by peers can hinder positive self-esteem and a child's acceptance of self. Rejection by peers may create loneliness and depression in children not accepted (Asher & Paquette, 2003; Asher & Williams, 1996). The lack of friends has been an identified precursor to both adult unemployment and mental health problems (Doll, 1996). Children who are not liked or accepted by peers often undergo years of social isolation and experience limited opportunities to develop appropriate developmental social skills which in turn exacerbate the isolation.

From a review of the literature, Doll (1996) has identified five factors that contribute to friendlessness: a) behaviors that harm and interrupt social interactions, b) limited cognitive ability to select the appropriate action or response during social interactions, c) limited ability to empathize emotionally with peers, d) social anxiety, and e) outside influences that thwart opportunities for students to interact. Limited transportation or isolated rural settings which restrict the ability for children to interact are both examples of constraints to the development of friendships. These factors are important to contemplate for both children with and without disabilities. Hay, Payne and Chadwick (2004) note that as children grow older "their social networks become increasingly complex, containing friends and acquaintances unknown to their family members" (2004). Consequently, children are required to develop social skills to form peer relationships across numerous settings. It is within the differing settings that friendships are developed (Hay et al., 2004).

Friendship and Children with Disabilities

Growing up with a disability may separate one from peers. Dealing with disability

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and health related concerns take an enormous toll on individuals and families alike. As disability challenges families on many fronts; psychologically, socially, and financially, resources necessary to focus on friendship development may be exhausted (Gordon, Hsia, & Kwok, 1996). Alienation due to disability may be all too real. In relating one child's experience of growing up with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, Bowman and Gordon (2000) relate the struggles of going to school, making friends and living with disability. They note the problems children with disabilities encounter, the name calling, the sense of isolation they all too frequently experience. Nevertheless, friendships also remain a source of strength for these children.

Several studies have reported that students, like the general population, hold hierarchical preferences for disability types and that conditions such as mental retardation, mental illness, and severe disabilities are rated with less approval and greater discomfort (Jones, Gottfried, & Owens, 1966; Link & Phelan, 1999; Lyons & Hayes, 1993; Martin, Pescosolido, & Tuch, 2000; Olkin & Howson, 1994). In Jones and colleagues' early study, 186 high school students completed a paired comparisons questionnaire examining 12 disabling conditions across 7 levels of intimacy. Results suggested that persons with severe mental retardation were typically viewed more unfavorably than the other disorders across the dimensions. Similarly, Lyons and Hayes examined the attitudes of over 500 undergraduate students towards persons with disabilities through a social distance scale. The scale required students to identify the closeness of relationship (i.e., have as a casual friend, would marry) they would have with persons with 21 different disabling conditions. Their findings indicated that although women appeared more accepting of persons with disabilities with compared to men, hierarchical preferences for various disability groups did exist. Specifically, persons with asthma, diabetes, and arthritis were more preferred while mental retardation, mental illness, and alcoholism were ranked with a greater desire for social distance.

One can note from the studies cited that hierarchical attitudes appear to have remained consistent for nearly the past 40

years leading one to have concern about the attitudes of children about their disabled peers, particularly those with severe disabilities. Although strategies such as increased contact has been beneficial for relationship development in some cases, most involved with disability issues recognize that both the quality and the quantity of contact that are critical.

Students with disabilities appear to face an unique situation when challenged with preconceived attitudes. They are frequently confronted with having to develop both a disabled and nondisabled persona; at time requiring help navigating disability issues while containing the stigma of disability (Wright, 1983). As noted by Low (1996), one tactic, unfortunately, has been the tendency of students with disabilities to distance themselves from others with disabilities. Low explored the experiences of 9 students with disabilities on a college campus. Participants in the study expressed the view that they were "not like other students with disabilities (p. 245). Interestingly, the participants reported others with disabilities were too self-focused and wanted to use disability as an excuse. While this distancing tactic may assist in smoothing relationships with the nondisabled, it may be done at the expense of negative self-view promotion and internalization by students with disabilities that disability is itself negative and those with disabling conditions should be avoided. The goal is not to reduce interactions with others with disabilities, rather to increase the quantity and quality of interactions with a variety of students from diverse backgrounds of age, gender, ethnicity, and physical/emotional abilities.

As more children with disabilities are being mainstreamed with regular education peers, factors related to peer acceptance and friendship development are important knowledge areas for school personnel. One obvious reason that inclusion has been thought to be essential is the belief that meaningful relationships may be created in the lives of students with disabilities with their nondisabled counterparts (Hamre-Nietupski, Shokoohi-Yekta, Hendrickson, & Nietupski, 1997). Within this vein, a number of studies have examined the formation of social relationships between children with

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and without disabilities. Siperstein, Widaman, and Leffert (1996) noted the difficulty students with mental retardation have when developing relationships with students without disabilities. In contrast, they suggest that children with mental retardation are frequently successful in establishing relationships with other children with mental retardation. Reporting on factors that influence both the acceptance and rejection of a child, they indicate that a positive interchange is determined, in part, by the quantity of the child's interaction, his or her capacity to engage in the interaction, and peer perception of the child's behavior. On the other hand, negative behavior exhibited by the child caused peer rejection. Interestingly, the teacher's perception of the child's behavior did not appear to influence peer acceptance; therefore, limiting the role teachers might take in this process. This concurs with findings by Hall (1994) that children with and without disabilities frequently associated within an integrated classroom setting without a structured intervention by teachers or other school personnel.

Friendship and Children without Disabilities

Much of the focus on friendship development has been concentrated primarily on increasing the social skills of children with disabilities as opposed to examining either the skills or characteristics of nondisabled children. This may limit potential relationship development through such a narrow perspective. Grenot-Scheyer (1994, p. 261) suggests that "because friendship can be considered to be mutual and reciprocal, it would seem that an examination of the contribution and perceptions of the partner without disabilities is reasonable." Staub, Schwartz, Gallucci and Peck (1994) explored four friendships within an inclusive elementary school. The focus of the study was to present four case studies of children who had become friends with students with disabilities. Through observation, video taping, and interviews, the researchers discovered that all of the relationships had their beginnings in activities that did not involve helping or assisting the child with a disability. Although the role of helper was sometimes assumed

later in the relationship, early involvement typically evolved from curriculum and school planning. The children without disabilities appeared to gain self-confidence, security and cooperative skills through their relationships with their disabled counterparts. Importantly, all the parents of the students without disabilities were supportive of their child's friendship with a child with a disability.

Teachers and students often describe the benefits students achieve through interacting with those who are different from themselves. Peck, Donaldson, and Pezzoli (1990) identified six gains perceived by nondisabled students which included: 1) an expanded understanding of one's self, 2) a growth in appreciating both the feelings and behavior of others, 3) less discomfort and fear of dissimilarities, 4) increased tolerance of others, 5) development of personal values and guidelines, and 6) the experience of genuine friendship with someone who differed from themselves. The most notable difficulty experienced in interactions, according to the children without disabilities, was the general lack of social skills many of the students with disabilities were believed to exhibit. These deficits ranged from failing to pick up social cues (e.g., interrupting) to ignoring boundary issues (e.g., calling too often). This put more pressure on the nondisabled peer to monitor relationships and/or set boundaries. In addition, Grenot-Scheyer (1994) suggests that particular characteristics of some children (e.g., more directive, more happier) appear to differ based on the closeness of their relationship with a peer with a disability.

Friendship Development

Friendship development has been examined most often through examining the friendship development of typical children (Freeman & Kasari, 1998). According to Hartup (1992), friendships are also thought to be the basis for future relationships. It is through friendships that children acquire basic social skills. The ability to develop a social network of friends also depends on proximity to other children (Hall, 1994). Little emphasis has been placed on friendship developmental patterns of students with disabilities or the ways developmental delays and/or

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differences impede relationships. For example, a student with a physical or mobility disorder requiring daily physical therapy may have limited hours in the day to work on friendship building. An adolescent with a disability may miss out on after school jobs or social activities where friendships are developed in contrast to nondisabled peers. According to Hay et al. (2004), in order to understand the manner in which children relate to peers must be viewed in conjunction with their social networks. Constraints created by special education classrooms or separate buses due to mobility issues frequently limit students with disabilities' opportunities to interact and develop social networks (Doll, 1994).

From a developmental perspective, Doll (1996) notes that friendship expectations evolve over time with preschool and kindergarten children choosing friends who are readily available. Consequently friends and relationships change often. Children begin to focus on the responsibilities of friendship by early elementary school. Friendships are maintained by one doing favors or being there for his or her friend. As children move to later elementary years, they begin to develop a more mature conception of friendship in that one recognizes the importance of loyalty and understanding. Finally, as children move into adolescence, they begin to develop an idea of shared support, trust, and empathy. Doll suggests that interventions designed to foster friendships must be developmentally specific. These strategies range from teaching children at an early age to initiate and be persistent in beginning friendships to honoring commitments as one gets older. This involves teaching children the concepts of sharing that move beyond those of material items to those of sharing thoughts, secrets, and concerns as they grow older. As children become more mature, interventions should help children learn to recognize interpersonal obligations and appropriate adolescent social skills. Hay et al. (2004) argue that peer interactions start in children's early years so that by preschool they either develop skills to form successful relationships or begin to experience problems within this area.

Finally, friendship development does not

stop at the conclusion of one's high school career. Students with disabilities, particularly those with severe disabilities, need the opportunity to continue to develop and maintain relationships post high-school. Feldman (2003) notes the importance of IEP activities that include areas of recreation/leisure and work. Family lifestyle assessments may be utilized to include leisure activities valued by the family. Chronologically-appropriate activities supported by the family are more likely to continue post high-school and provide greater avenues for continued friendship development (Feldman, 2003). Within age-appropriate settings such as community colleges and work sites, friendship obtainment and maintenance may be furthered.

Facilitating Friendships for Children with Disabilities

Teachers and counselors need to be proactive in assisting friendship development within school systems. For children with disabilities, increased attention may be required to help with integration and acceptance. Due to negative public attitudes regarding those with disabilities and their life experiences, children with disabilities may have lower self-esteem and confidence in their abilities to make friends (Bowman & Gordon, 2000). School counselors can assist in fostering positive self-esteem with these students and provide opportunities for skill practice. Just listening to the concerns and self-doubts of students with disabilities can be crucial. In addition, both educators and counselors can aid children in identifying whether the concerns they have are disability specific or pretty common for all children their age. This does not mean to negate the importance of the issue, but a perspective of similarity with nondisabled peers can help to normalize a child's experiences. Clearly, children, parents, and professionals should not assume that disability is the pivotal factor preventing a child in developing and maintaining friendships as loneliness and isolation cut across all ability levels.

Mainstreaming has been thought to be important precisely because students with disabilities have limited social relationships (Hamre-Nietupski et al., 1997). There are

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some inherent problems, though, with mainstreaming. As Freeman and Kasari (1998) note, children with developmental disabilities need to have time to build relationships. Students who move from a regular classroom to a resource room or speech therapy during the day have less consistent time with their peers in contrast to students without disabilities who remain within a single educational setting. Children with developmental disabilities also have differing abilities across domains. Besides chronological age, they frequently have little in common with their peers in the mainstream setting. Consequently, educators must look at numerous factors when assisting a child with a developmental disability in friendship building which include peer acceptance, cognitive and language abilities of the students, and similarity of interest (Freeman & Kasari, 1998). In addition, teachers and counselors need to make certain there exists enough time and consistency in the school setting so that children, particularly those with disabilities, have time to work on friendship building.

Specific characteristics and needs of each child must also be considered. According to Siperstein, Leffert, and Widaman (1996), strategies to promote social acceptance of students with mental retardation include 1) increasing the opportunities for interactions with peers, 2) facilitating social skills development that most closely matches the skills of nondisabled peers, and 3) helping influence and promote positive views toward those with disabilities. In addition, friendships can not be perceived as only acquired in school settings (Freeman & Kasari, 1998). Students with disabilities may need assistance in generating appropriate social skills across settings. Skill building needs to be age appropriate and is more likely to be successful if skills are taught within a context of real life as well as in natural environment settings (Feldman, 2003).

Finally Doll (1996) identifies three ingredients for helping children with and without disabilities build friendships. Suggestions include 1) knowing how friendship is defined at specific age periods and target interventions to develop skills important to the child's age group, 2) making certain that activities that promote interactions are avail-

able, and 3) working on social skills in the genuine play setting. Teachers may work on these areas directly in the classroom. Counselors may promote these activities both in their own counseling activities and when serving as consultants to educators.

Strategies to Promote Friendships

Several researchers have identified specific strategies that teachers and school systems can utilize in classrooms and in school interactions (Falvey & Rosenberg, 1995; Kamps, Kravits, & Ross, 2002, Schleiien, Green, & Heyne, 1993). Many of these suggestions can be implemented in the classroom and school environment with minimal modifications and without financial concern or additional instructional assistance.

Classroom modifications. Through an examination of past studies, Sainato and Carta (1992) conclude that simple modifications to several classroom variables can have a positive effect on socialization. They identify classroom space, group composition, classroom activities, activity structure, and classroom materials as variables that can improve the process of social interaction between students with and without disabilities. Classroom arrangements are influential in promoting interactions between children by widening their social circle through modifications such as arranging small groups (two to three children per group), allowing for free time, and utilizing less structured activities with minimum teacher involvement. Certain classroom materials, such as sand and blocks, promote sharing and interaction and have also been found to create social opportunities. Toys and games used by children with differing abilities may also be integrated into school activities to enhance social interaction possibilities (Doll, 1996).

Room size has also been found to be influential on interactions. Sainato and Carta (1992) note that higher social interactions among students were recorded in areas allowing less than 20 square feet per child. Classroom modifications such as these create *opportunity*, a necessary condition for friendships to occur, by allowing proximity and frequency of interaction (Falvey & Rosenberg, 1995; Ladd & Hart, 1992). In a study

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examining social acceptance and social rejection of children with mental disabilities, Siperstein et al. (1996) support the need for social opportunity and identified peer interaction frequency as an influential variable in determining social acceptance. They suggest that the first step in furthering social acceptance of children with mental retardation was to increase the amount of interaction with others with a similar disability. It would seem that greater opportunities to interact would also be critical with nondisabled peers.

Curriculum. Falvey and Rosenberg (1995) state that the concept of friendship can be integrated into the curriculum, helping students learn about “the complex nature of the relationship between friendship, respecting others, treating others with dignity. . .” (p. 273). As an example, they illustrate a thematic lesson for elementary aged students incorporating the meaning of friendship and characteristics of friends into several subject areas. Teachers can also utilize assignments requiring shared goals and cooperative learning, generating a sense of similarity and unity (Stainback & Stainback, 1987). Programs designed to minimize social differences between students can facilitate friendship development (Schleien et al., 1993). Therefore, activities and curriculum should focus on students’ similarities rather than individual differences. Curriculum can also serve as a forum to introduce factual information regarding disabilities and how students should respond in special situations, thus encouraging a sense of mutual dependence. These suggestions are thought to develop a sense of community in the classroom and facilitate interdependence among peers.

Kennedy (2001) concurs that a sense of interdependence is essential in the development of friendship among children with differing abilities. Interdependence, as opposed to independence, encourages both social development and skill development. Interdependence among peers can be promoted through the use of instructional techniques that incorporate “interlocking, cooperative, and collaborative contingencies of reinforcement” (p. 126). Interventions, such as “peer support” programs, which take place in general education classrooms allow for positive

outcomes through quantity, quality, and durability of social interactions.

Peer support. Peer support programs taking place in general education classrooms with general education teachers should encourage natural occurring social interaction—a critical characteristic for friendship development (Kamps et al., 2002; Kennedy, 2001). Kennedy (2001) further explains that natural social interaction includes “participation in typical environments, with typical peers, and engaging in typical activities” (p. 126). Studies support more frequent social interactions within a natural setting that encompass less classroom structure with minimal teacher direction (Sainato & Carta, 1992). Individual interests, individual schedules, and existing social circles should be examined and considered when developing peer support groups (Kamps et al., 2002). In addition, peer tutors can be trained in areas of CPR and first aid so that they are more comfortable with their own skills when being a buddy of a student with a disability. Finally, students without disabilities can be assigned as friends for students with disabilities when riding the bus, attending assemblies, or participating in after school activities. In this way, friendships will be encouraged across a multiple number of settings.

Keeping Friendships Real

Research suggests that teachers of both general education and special education report having a responsibility in promoting these relationships and hold the beliefs that friendship between children with and without disabilities benefits all students (Hamre-Nietupski et al., 1997). Special educators, in particular, can be a crucial asset to their students with disabilities by gaining knowledge about what skills in general are useful for friendship development and promoting those skills within their curriculum focus. Likewise, regular education teachers can create mainstreaming atmospheres that increase the likelihood of successful interactions within their classroom. For instance, Siperstein et al. (1996) noted that student behavior that teachers may perceive as hindering academic skill development such as frequent talk and interaction may actually be providing oppor-

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tunities to increase the social acceptance of children with disabilities. School counselors can assist teachers and school personnel in understanding some of the underlying dynamics of friendship building and ways to assist children in this process. Furthermore, parents may be informed of strategies being implemented within the classroom so that they can work with the child on these skills outside of the classroom (Kemple, 1992).

Determining whether to focus on academic versus friendship skills is another important curriculum consideration. School personnel may find that needs of students may differ across ages and types of disabilities. Hamre-Nietupski (1993) investigated the preferences of parents of children with moderate and severe/profound disabilities to determine their views on educational programming. Although parents differed in their order of school task preference (e.g., functional life skills, academic skills) for students with moderate and more severe disabilities, all suggested that the school curriculum include friendship development as the focus for at least 25% of the school week. Furthermore, children with disabilities, particularly severe disabilities, need opportunities to learn the skills and practice them. Teaching social skills in isolation, outside of the natural environment, and without reinforcement will hinder skill acquisition (Kennedy, 2001). In addition, skills that build relationships at differing social levels are important. Friendships typically evolve from shared activities, interests and opportunities. Creating a social network of friends in school settings where movement is fluid and students with disabilities regularly proceed from setting to setting may require school personnel to take extra time in each environment to best assist the student. Finally, school personnel need to be trained in disability and diversity issues. Helping children with disabilities develop friendships must be viewed both similarly and differently than typical children. All school personnel can provide a critical role in helping students find ways to interact and make friendships that include all students.

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