

## Keys to Inclusion

Last October the youth of PAVE's Community Inclusion Program got the chance to experience Kids Included Together's (KIT) Annual Conference in San Diego, CA. The six youth learned about natural friendships, inclusion, facilitating friendship, and more. Each youth brought something back with them that they will embark a new life with. Because of the youth's inspiration throughout the trip, we wanted to share it with the world. We asked Suzanne Stoltz of KIT to write an article better explaining the inclusion process and how KIT works as an organization. Below is what she wrote:



“While most of us advocate for community inclusion of young people with disabilities, the extensive value of inclusion can be difficult for some to grasp. The value goes beyond children's desire to enjoy education and recreation programs alongside their peers. Inclusion impacts young people's access to development, to building social networks, and to positive views of themselves. Inclusion also impacts the whole community, helping to debunk stereotypes, to build cooperative relationships, and to create spaces that acknowledge and value differences among individuals.

If we consider how children without disabilities grow as a result of their involvement in activities, we can imagine what another child stands to lose when she is excluded from those same activities. Where will she practice interacting outside of her own family? Where will she begin to imagine and get excited about the impact she might make on the world?

At **Kids Included Together (KIT)**, we strive to help recreation, child development, and youth enrichment programs to better support inclusion. Our trainers and inclusion specialists offer a wide variety of strategies for giving children with and without disabilities access to participation. Although there are many strategies that can be used, professionals can focus on three key steps: provide a welcoming attitude, promote communication, and practice flexibility.

### 1. **Provide a welcoming attitude**

Children of all ages can sense whether they are welcome or not. Be sure to greet children, express that you are glad to have them, and continue to invite their participation. Parents also sense the sincerity of your welcome and, with a heartfelt welcome, will feel much more comfortable leaving their child in your care.

### 2. **Promote communication**

Being able to talk openly with children, parents, and other professionals about what will work best for including individual children is highly valuable. You might start off with “I'm so glad to have you here” or “We're glad your child is here. We want to work together with you to provide a good experience for her.” In addition, we want to give children opportunities to practice communication as well. You might consider modeling how to initiate friendship, how to ask for help, and how to cope with frustration.

### 3. **Practice flexibility**



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In acknowledging individual differences of the children in our programs, we have to practice flexibility. We can consider the various energy levels, the various interests, the various skills and plan our activities and supports accordingly. If a child has difficulty sitting still, we might organize activities that allow her to move about or allow her to hold a toy that might help her remain focused for longer. If children are disinterested in an activity, we could switch activities to something they enjoy more.

By implementing these three key steps, you will help us build truly inclusive communities and improve the lives of the children you serve. If you are interested in learning more strategies, you can visit [kitonline.org](http://kitonline.org) to view instructional videos created by Kids Included Together (KIT) and to find information about upcoming webinars and live trainings. KIT's 7<sup>th</sup> Annual National Conference on Inclusion will be held in October 2011. We'd love to have you there! For more information, visit our website at [www.kitonline.org](http://www.kitonline.org)."

*Suzanne Stoltz, Kids Included Together*

PAVE is excited to share the same passion as KIT does by envisioning a natural and holistic view of inclusion. We strive to bring individuals information on making this world a better place. Through the trainings, videos and conferences KIT is able to provide the nation; we hope you will pass this along to educate others with this great resource.