Supporting Children with Developmental Disabilities
Developed by Kids Included Together with funding from the Special Hope Foundation.
Understanding Developmental Disabilities
Supporting Inclusion for All Children
Creating Diverse and Accepting Environments
Tips for Facilitating Friendships
Resources
Developmental disabilities are defined as severe, chronic disabilities that occur any time between birth and 21 years of age that are expected to last a lifetime. Developmental disabilities are not always visible and may be cognitive, physical or a combination of both. Developmental disabilities often result in difficulty performing daily activities such as taking care of one’s self, communication, learning, mobility, and independent living.

Examples of developmental disabilities include:
- Autism spectrum disorders
- Fragile X syndrome
- Down syndrome
- Cerebral palsy
In an out-of-school time program, a child with a developmental disability may need support in the following areas:

Remembering and following directions
Applying skills to new situations or new people
Solving problems
Developing communication and social skills
Using self-help skills such as eating snacks and washing hands

Intellectual disabilities  ·  Rett syndrome  ·  Epilepsy  ·  Spina bifida  ·  Cystic fibrosis
Supporting Inclusion for Children with Developmental Disabilities

Participation in inclusive settings can help children with developmental disabilities develop skills in learning and using appropriate communication, socialization and self-help skills. An inclusive setting also creates opportunities for friendships because children are in close proximity to one another. Although close and frequent contact is an important first step, simply being in the same place with others does not automatically lead to friendship for all children. Children with and without disabilities need adults who understand their unique needs and abilities, provide appropriate support when needed, plan for activities that promote social skill development, and create accepting environments.
Understand Unique Needs and Abilities: 
Put the Child First

Children and adults with disabilities are often defined by differences in development or areas where they need assistance. It is important to emphasize that children are much more than their diagnosis. They have their own unique strengths and interests and areas where their skills and behaviors are age-appropriate. Focusing on what a child can do will lead to discoveries about who the child is, what she likes to do, what makes her smile, and the types of things that can be used to help her develop skills.

Provide Appropriate Support when Needed: 
Make Respectful Accommodations

Making respectful accommodations involves putting forth the effort to support each child as an individual. Doing so will help and ensure that every child has access to program offerings, whether they are opportunities to connect with peers, learn a new skill or game, or participate in art or recreational activities. Accommodations are often changes or modifications made to expectations, requirements, materials, activities, or the environment that promote meaningful participation.
Plan Activities that Promote Social Skills:
Be Intentional and Reflective

One of the most important opportunities child and youth programs have to offer children is the chance to make friends. Program professionals can maximize opportunities for children to connect with peers and develop friendships by being intentional and reflective when teaching social skills. Planning involves going beyond responding to situations that occur in the environment to discovering ways to help children develop their skills. The continuous process involves identifying where a child may need support, planning cooperative activities to increase understanding and social skills, observing how the child reacts, and making adjustments as needed.

Other areas where a child may need support:
- Suggesting joint play with peers
- Sharing play materials with peers
- Sharing information with peers
- Asking peers questions
Other areas where a child may need support:

- Suggesting joint play with peers
- Sharing play materials with peers
- Responding to a peer’s initiation of play
- Asking peers for help
- Asking peers questions
- Sharing information with peers
- Asking peers questions
- Commenting to peers
- Taking turns during play
- Staying on topic during conversation

Child uses the conversation starter during the skit successfully. He does not use it outside of the activity.

Responding to a peer’s initiation of play
- Asking peers for help
- Asking peers questions
- Commenting to peers
- Taking turns during play
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Remind child about the skits. Practice using the conversation starters and write a story about starting conversations.
Create Accepting Environments:
Model Respect for Differences

Inclusive child and youth programs that create accepting environments send a powerful message that all children are welcomed and valued as contributing members. Children have a natural curiosity and try to understand the world around them, including differences among themselves and others. When adults model respect for those differences and acknowledge curiosity with honesty and explanations that children can understand, children learn to view differences with acceptance. The path to creating an accepting environment begins with making accommodations and supporting each child as an individual and continues with thoughtful responses to children’s questions and comments. The following are some tips for creating an accepting environment:

Treat comments like questions
Children may comment on their observations as a way to confirm their thoughts and ideas. As adults, we may be surprised when children point out differences between themselves and others. Remaining sincere, and non-judgmental, adults can rephrase a child’s comment and ask questions to discover her reasoning. Once a discovery is made, it opens the door to explanations.
Provide honest and simple explanations
As children comment about and question differences, address their inquiries in the moment to minimize uncertainty or discomfort. For example, if a child says, “Why is he drooling? He looks like a baby.” An honest and simple response might be, “He is 6 years old, just like you and he likes to play with other 6-year-olds. Sometimes it’s hard from him to control the muscles in his face. Friends help him by offering him a tissue or napkin.”

Read books on celebrating differences and making friends
There are numerous children’s books that focus on teaching children about differences and how to make friends. In addition to reading these types of books, follow up with games and activities to reinforce and personalize learning. One idea might be to have the children draw pictures or take photographs to create their own book about the topic.

Invite people with disabilities to share their experiences
Children benefit from having an opportunity to hear people with disabilities talk about their lives, obstacles, experiences and successes. This experience also gives them the chance to ask questions in the context of a safe environment. Community organizations and support groups are often a good resource for finding a person with a disability that can speak about respect and appreciation for differences or volunteer for an event.
Include Children with Same-Age Peers

Many children with developmental disabilities participate in special education classrooms with mixed age groups or with children with limited social skills. A child or youth program may be the one place the child is included with other children his own age. Children should be placed with children of their own chronological age, rather than placing them in a group based on their cognitive or developmental age.

Build on interests
Children with developmental disabilities may be more interested in characters, shows, games, and toys targeted for younger children. It is important to know the interests of the child’s same age peers in order to encourage the child to develop an interest in the same things. Partnering with the family to introduce popular games and toys at home may help to spark the child’s interest.

Use creative pairings
School-age children typically choose to play and work with the same group of children each day. There are creative ways to mix it up and encourage children to work with others. For example, pair children up by eye color, birthday month or hobby and have them work on a cooperative project together.
Start small
In working to create connections between peers, it is important to start with a small activity or period of time so that all children can experience success. It is also good to start with an activity both children are familiar with and know how to complete. For example, if both children enjoy drawing, a joint drawing activity could be introduced. Depending on the children, breaking down the interaction into steps may be helpful: 1) say hello; 2) find a spot to sit together; 3) draw a picture of what you like to do; 4) compare your drawing with the child sitting next to you.

Children with developmental disabilities can be active, contributing members of a child or youth program with the appropriate accommodations and supports. Kids Included Together (KIT) is available as a resource in learning to support all children in community programs. KIT’s National Training Center on Inclusion (NTCI) offers downloadable podcasts and a knowledge database for inclusion-related topics. Visit us online at kitonline.org/ntci.
Recommended Book List for Adults

*Delicate Threads: Friendships between Children with and without Special Needs in Inclusive Settings* by Debbie Staub (Woodbine House, 1998)


*Team-Building Activities for Every Group* by Alanna Jones (Rec Room Publishing, 1999)


References

1. The National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities, nacdd.org
6. Diana Pastora Carson, *Ability Awareness in Action, abilityawareness.com*
Recommended Book List for Children

*All Kinds of Friends, Even Green!* by Ellen B. Senisi  
(Woodbine House, 2002)

*Don’t Call Me Special* by Pat Thomas (Barron’s Educational Series, 2002)

*Hands are Not for Hitting* by Martine Agassi (Free Spirit Publishing, 2000)

*How to Be a Friend* by Laurie Krasny Brown & Marc Brown  
(Little, Brown and Company, 1998)

*It’s Okay to Be Different* by Todd Parr (Little, Brown and Company, 2001)

*I Will Be Your Friend: Songs and Activities for Young Peacemakers* by Teaching Tolerance (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2003)


*Tobin Learns to Make Friends* by Diane Murrell  
(Future Horizons, Inc., 2001)

*We’ll Paint the Octopus Red* by Stephanie Stuve-Bodeen  
(Woodbine House, 1998)
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