Supporting Children & Youth with Developmental Disabilities
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Developmental disabilities are defined as severe, chronic disabilities that occur any time between birth and 21 years of age and are expected to last a lifetime.

*Developmental disabilities are not always visible and may be cognitive, physical or a combination of both.*

Children and youth who have these disabilities often have difficulty performing daily activities, such as communication, learning, mobility, self-care and independent living.

**Some examples of developmental disabilities include:**

- Autism spectrum disorders
- Fragile X syndrome
- Down syndrome
- Cerebral palsy
- Rett syndrome
- Epilepsy
- Spina bifida
- Cystic fibrosis
- Intellectual Disability
It is important to note that it is not the role of the child and youth personnel to diagnose someone in the program. Learning about developmental disabilities will enable you to better understand and make accommodations for children and youth in your program.

In an out-of-school time program, a child or youth with a developmental disability may need support in the following areas:

- Remembering and following directions
- Applying skills to new situations or people
- Problem-solving skills
- Developing communication and social skills
- Self-help skills, such as hand washing
Creating Diverse & Accepting Environments

Inclusive child and youth programs that create an accepting environment will send a powerful message that all are welcomed and valued as contributing members. Children and youth have a natural curiosity about the world around them - including differences among themselves and others. Read on for tips to create an accepting environment at your program.

Model respect for differences
When adults model respect for differences and acknowledge curiosity with honest explanations that are easy to understand, children and youth learn to be accepting of differences. The path to creating an accepting environment begins with making accommodations and supporting each child, youth or teen as an individual. This path continues with thoughtful responses to their questions and comments.

Treat comments like questions
Children and youth may comment on observations as a way to confirm their thoughts and ideas. As adults,
we may be surprised when they point out differences between themselves and others. By remaining sincere and non-judgmental, adults can rephrase a comment and ask questions to discover the reasoning behind it.

**Provide honest and simple explanations**

As you hear comments and questions about differences, address 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 six years old, just like you, and he likes to play with other six-year-olds. Sometimes it’s hard from him to control the muscles in his face. Friends can help him by offering him a tissue or a napkin.”

Read books about celebrating differences

There are numerous books that focus on teaching about celebrating 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 is to have children or youth draw pictures or take photos and create their own book about making friends and celebrating differences. This will also help start a dialog and provide insight into their feelings and thoughts on the topic.
Listen to first-hand experiences

Children and youth will benefit from hearing people with disabilities talk about their lives, obstacles, experiences and success. This also gives children and youth in your program a 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.

KIT’s National Training Center on Inclusion (NTCI) offers a variety of resources for inclusion-related topics.

Visit us today at KITonline.org
Participation in inclusive programs can help children and youth who have developmental disabilities learn listening skills and appropriate communication, socialization and self-help skills. **An inclusive environment also creates opportunities for friendships because children and youth 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 people. Children and youth with and without disabilities need adults who understand their unique needs and abilities. Child and youth personnel can also provide appropriate support when needed, plan for activities that promote social skill development, and create accepting environments.

**Understand unique needs and abilities**

Children, youth and adults with disabilities are often defined by differences in development or areas where they need assistance.
It is important to emphasize that a person is much more than their diagnosis. Individuals have unique strengths and interests. Focusing on the individual will lead to discoveries about who they are and activities they enjoy. Include all participants in your program by celebrating uniqueness and individual strengths.

Plan activities that promote social skills

Child and youth personnel can maximize opportunities for participants 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.
Areas of support for social skills include:

- Responding to peer-initiated play/engagement
- Dialog and verbal communication
- Taking turns and sharing
- Keeping on topic during conversation
- Asking peers for help

Provide appropriate support when needed

Providing respectful accommodations involves putting forth the effort to support each child and youth as an individual. Doing so will help ensure that every child and youth 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.
Supporting Inclusion & Social Skills Continued...

Sample Plan to Support Social Skills

**Identify Area of Support**
- Trouble initiating conversations with peers

**Plan Cooperative Activities**
- List conversation starters, and create skits in small groups using the list

**Observe Action**
- Conversations were started within skits, but are not initiated outside of that format

**Adjustment**
- Continue practicing conversation starters and write a story about starting conversations

Supporting Children & Youth with Developmental Disabilities
Tips for Facilitating Friendships

Friendships not only enrich our lives, but are important tools in our social and emotional development. Through friendships, peers can learn, be challenged, and grow. Friendships provide a sense of well-being and support, which is important for success in life.

Inclusion with same-age peers

Many children or youth with developmental disabilities participate in special education classrooms with mixed age groups or with others who may have limited social skills. A child or youth program may be the one place they are included with others their age. Everyone benefits when children and youth are included with same-age peers because it fosters acceptance of diversity. Additionally, children and youth who are included become exposed to developmental and age-appropriate social and recreational skills that are naturally modeled by their same-age peers.
Build on interests

Children and youth with developmental disabilities may be more interested in characters, shows, games, and toys created for a younger age group. It is important to know the interests of their same-age peers in order to encourage them to develop an interest in the same things. Common interests provide more chances of interaction and social exchange among their peers. Partnering with the family to introduce popular games and toys at home may also help facilitate an interest.

Use creative pairings

Children and youth typically choose to play and work with the same group of people each day. There are creative ways to mix it up and encourage them to work with others. For example, you can create teams based on eye color, birthday month or hobby.
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 a good idea to start with an activity both are familiar with and know how to complete. For example, if both teens in a group enjoy drawing, a joint drawing activity could be introduced.

Depending on each individual’s needs, breaking down the interaction into steps may be helpful. You can be as simple as:

1. Say “Hello”
2. Find a spot to sit together
3. Draw a picture of something you like to do
4. Share your drawing with your partner
Recommended Book List for Adults

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

Promoting Social Success: A Curriculum for Children with Special Needs  
by Gary N. Siperstein & Emily Rickards (Brookes Publishing, 2004).

by Kelly McKinnon & Janis Krempa (DRL Books, 2002).

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

The New Language of Toys: Teaching Communication Skills to Children with Special Needs  
by Sue Schwartz (Woodbine House, 2004).
Recommended Book List for Children & Teens

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).

How to Be a Friend

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

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

TEENS

A 5 Is Against the Law! Social Boundaries: Straight Up! An Honest Guide for Teens and Young Adults

Ready-to-Use Social Skills Lessons & Activities for Grades 7-12
   by Ruth Weltmann Begun (Society for Prevention of Violence, 1996).

Social Skills for Teenagers and Adults with Asperger Syndrome: A Practical Guide to Day-to-day Life
List of References


Every child’s life is enhanced through shared experiences and friendships with peers of all abilities.

Thank you for making a difference.

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