Can you imagine a life without friendships? Much of our happiness depends on having friends (Myers & Diener, 1995). Friendships are important during all stages of our life, but are particularly important for students during the middle school years because they provide support that may have been previously given by the family (Zetlin & Murtaugh, 1988). Students with disabilities want friends, too; but sometimes friendships between them and students without disabilities do not occur.

When friendships do not occur, it is important for you to think about the strategies you can use to encourage friendships between students with and without disabilities. For example, you may decide to teach the student with a disability specific social skills, like how to start a conversation, or you may ask a group of peers to sit with the student at lunch and talk to the student. Although these strategies may be helpful, many students with and without disabilities still do not form friendships.

There may be many reasons why friendships do not form, but one possible reason could be because teachers usually take the lead in devising and implementing the friendship strategy. Even if teachers create and implement a peer-support program, they usually are the ones that tell peers what to do and what to say to the student with a disability. It is possible that peers, particularly older peers (such as middle school students) have their own ideas about what kind of strategies might be best to promote friendships between students with and without disabilities.

Increasing Friendships Among Middle School Students

Several years ago, Haring and Breen (1992) demonstrated that a social network intervention was successful for increasing the quantity and quality of interactions and friendships between middle-school-age students with and without disabilities. Haring and Breen stated that the intervention might have been successful because peer ownership, leadership, problem-solving, and strategy development were emphasized over teacher-mediated strategies. They speculated that when peers had greater control of the intervention, it increased their participation, the durability of the intervention, and the occurrence of more age-appropriate interactions.

It makes sense that some peers might have better ideas for facilitating friendships than some teachers because peers know what is important, what is likely to work, what fits naturally into the social climate at school, and what will be best received by other peers. Thus, the ideas generated by middle school students for this article will provide you with easy-to-implement strategies that may help your students be socially included in your school.

**Gathering Friendship-Facilitation Ideas From Middle School Peers**

We conducted interviews with students who had friendships with peers with disabilities at three middle schools located in two Midwestern communities. The schools ranged in size from 600 to 1,000 students; between 10% and 20% of the school population had students with disabilities.

As part of a larger study (Han, 2003), 206 middle school students completed a survey on friendship expectations. Of these students, 42 reported that they had friends with disabilities. Of this group, 33 students agreed to participate in interviews to provide more in-depth information about their friendships. Seventeen students (52%) were in the sixth grade, 9 were in the seventh grade, and the remaining 7 were eighth graders. Twenty-five of the students
(76%) were female. The participants in the interviews met their friends with disabilities in their classes, and those with “best friends” (32%) had known their friends for a “long time.” The friends with disabilities had disabilities ranging from mild to severe, but the majority of the friends had learning or physical disabilities. The participants reported that they had no brothers or sisters who had disabilities, although some of their family members had mild disabilities (e.g., diabetes, wheelchair user). When asked why they had friends with disabilities, most of them (42%) said they liked the friends’ personal characteristics (e.g., “He’s nice”), or the disability did not matter to them.

We conducted semistructured interviews with the 33 middle school participants. All of the interviews were conducted individually and audiotaped for later transcription. In the interviews, the students were asked about their friendships with peers with disabilities and the strategies that could be used to facilitate friendships between students with and without disabilities. The ideas that the students generated were analyzed and classified into several categories using a content analysis procedure (Neuendorf, 2002). An interrater agreement score of 86.1% was achieved between two raters when 36% of the categories were coded independently and then compared. The following information represents the ideas that students suggested. Specifically, the students talked about strategies for teachers and other students that might encourage friendships between students with and without disabilities.

### Facilitation Strategies for Teachers

The students suggested nine ideas for promoting friendships between students with and without disabilities. In general, they urged teachers to have students with disabilities included in their classes more often and suggested that teachers create specific programs, especially after-school programs, for students with and without disabilities (see box, “Peer Suggestions for Teacher Facilitation Strategies”).

#### Segregation Is Unfair

The majority of the students stressed the necessity for inclusive classroom practice. For example, a seventh-grade girl said, “If they’re not in your classes with you then you’re probably not going to meet them and you’re not going to talk to them, or anything.”

Another seventh-grade girl told us, “The part of school that I think of is friends. It doesn’t seem like it’s fair for people with disabilities just to have to be in other classes, just because they have a disability.”

An eighth-grade girl also added, “I know that the students with the disability . . . they do need extra help. . . . But I think that they should also have the majority of regular classes so they could understand and be able to talk and, you know, learn.”

#### Teachers Should Come Into Classes to Give Us More Information About Students With Disabilities

The students suggested that teachers needed to talk to classes about some of the specific characteristics of peers with disabilities so students would understand the reasons for the occurrence of some “different” behaviors. They also suggested that teachers needed to emphasize the similarities between the two groups, rather than concentrating only on the differences. A seventh-grade girl shared her experience with us:

I think that Ms. Brownie was coming in and telling us that, you know, he [a student with

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**Peer Suggestions for Teacher Facilitation Strategies**

- Segregation is unfair. Put students with disabilities in our classrooms more often. If they need extra help, provide them with extra help in our classes; don’t put them in separate classes.
- Teachers should come into classes to give us more information about students with disabilities. Tell us why they might act differently or have trouble learning. Tell us how they are the same as us.
- Don’t let students make fun of students with disabilities. Give us a reason to be nice to students with disabilities. Praise students with disabilities in the classroom so we know you think they are doing a good job.
- Create programs where both students with and without disabilities can hang out with each other. Don’t always have us teach them; create programs that are fun for all of us.
- Use volunteer peer partners. Let us be buddies. Make sure only “nice” students are volunteers.
- Group students with disabilities into our social networks. It’s better to include students with disabilities in our group rather than pairing them alone with us. Also, include them in a group with popular kids.
- Have students with disabilities tell us about their disabilities. If we know more about a disability, from the student him- or herself, we will likely feel more positive.
- Clubs or after-school activities should include kids with disabilities and should be of interest to everyone. Students with disabilities should be included in our extracurricular activities after school—not everything should occur during school hours.
- Let students with disabilities take the same bus as us. Some of our busses should be made accessible so all of us can attend after-school activities.
disability] had trouble learning, that he was going to have trouble talking to us and that he was going to be shy at first, and that he’s going to be loud. That was what helped us, just because it was like if he had an outburst, this kid in my class used to be really loud and just talk and talk and talk. And nobody ever told him to shut up because they knew.

Another same-grade boy added, “Teachers could show that disabled people are the same as the other people; they have the same interests and the same feelings, except they might not just learn as well or they might not be able to move their legs.”

A seventh-grade girl also stated that teachers could “teach people about disabilities and maybe why they have them, and how they can help.”

Don’t Let Students Make Fun of Students With Disabilities

Many of the students told us that their friends with disabilities were sometimes teased and called names by other students. They suggested that teachers should intervene so that teasing and name-calling did not take place. A sixth-grade boy said,

I know that there are a few kids who would make fun of them. And then someone, the teacher, could talk to them about it, let them know it’s not okay to do that because what if you had the disability? You wouldn’t want people to say that to you. I always think of that.

A seventh-grade girl even suggested that teachers could do something when peers with disabilities came into the classroom, saying,

Before they come in the class, before you know they were in the class for the first day, maybe talk to them and tell them to try to be nicer and get to know him before they judged him . . . just give them a little incentive to be nice to them, that it would help.

In addition, a seventh-grade boy suggested that teachers should try to praise students with disabilities when they do something good in the class, and maybe this would decrease teasing and name-calling.

Create Programs Where Both Students With and Without Disabilities Can Hang Out With Each Other

Having informal opportunities to interact with others is important for forming social relationships, and the students we interviewed also stressed the need for these opportunities. They thought that activities that were free from the burden of academic content and where both students with and without disabilities could spend time together would be helpful for facilitating interactions. A seventh-grade boy said, “To make friends, introduce the people to them, or like set up a program where the person spends a day with a disabled person and learns about him and finds out that they can do the same things as the other people can.”

Some of the students even suggested programs where they could spend longer amounts of time together with peers with disabilities. For example, a sixth-grade boy suggested, “Maybe like a summer school sort of thing. You meet up with someone with a disability and stay with them for a while.”

Another seventh-grade girl also thought about a 1-day program, saying, “Well, you could actually like, I mean for 1 day have kids that never even talked to a disability kid . . . like hang out with him for a whole day or something like that.”

Use Volunteer Peer Partners

A common practice used in many school settings for promoting social relationships between students with and without disabilities is peer partner or buddy systems where students assist their peers with disabilities (e.g., Frey, 2001). Many of the students stated that a volunteer program designed to help students with disabilities would be useful. However, a sixth-grade girl issued a cautious statement about such programs: “Sometimes a person with disabilities gets put with a mean person and then they end up getting a bad grade on their project because the other person doesn’t want to do the project with them [students with disabilities].”

This should remind us that when we assign a student to be a peer helper, he or she should be willing to perform that role. Teachers must also monitor the pair.

Group Students With Disabilities Into Our Social Networks

Some of the students thought that rather than having a student with disabilities paired with just one student, it would be better if the student with disabilities could be included in a group of students who consider each other to be friends. For example, an eighth-grade boy suggested, “Get some of your friends and then put a person with a disability in there. It’s not like one-on-one, but it’s a group of people.”

A seventh-grade girl proposed a more specific idea on grouping by adding,

Teachers may be able to help them sit with groups, like popular kids, that aren’t going to get to know them. I know there’s a lot of kids in this school that wouldn’t even think of going near my friend [with disabilities] just because, not because
Have Students With Disabilities Tell Us About Their Disabilities

It was interesting that some of the students pointed out the necessity for students with disabilities to assume a role themselves in the friendship process. They thought that students with disabilities should do something that would enable typical students get to know them better. An eighth-grade girl said, 

“I think sometimes people can understand things better if they know about it. Because people know a person has a disability, but at the same time they don’t really understand what the disability really is. Maybe like have that student share what her disability is if they feel comfortable with that. So if students knew what the disability was, they might not feel so negative about it.

A seventh-grade boy told us an example. He recalled:

Right now, we’re doing this thing called “Someone Special,” and what we do is we put our pictures on a bulletin board and my friend [with disabilities] Jimmy shared; and I guess it will help people know about him because Jimmy brought in pictures about his house and stuff, and if they did more stuff like that [it] would help, too.

Clubs or After-School Activities Should Include Kids With Disabilities and Should Be of Interest to Everyone

Schools offer various extracurricular activities that provide additional opportunities to learn new skills and interact with others. Unfortunately, many of the students interviewed did not see students with disabilities coming to the after-school activities. A seventh-grade girl advised:

Let them come, too. But they’d [teachers] be scared that just because, you know, we be rowdy [and] that we’ll be yelling in their ears and all that. But

they don’t trust us that much so they don’t let them [peers with disabilities] come around us a lot.

The students stated the need for clubs or other after-school activities that students with disabilities could easily participate in (see box, “What Does the Literature Say About Friendships in Young Adolescents?”). A sixth-grade girl suggested, “Maybe if there were some more clubs that the kids with disabilities would be interested in, it’d probably be a good idea.”

Another sixth-grade girl told us of a club she belonged to:

We have a program called “Hang Time.” You can do your
“Get some of your friends and then put a person with a disability in there. It’s not like one-on-one, but it’s a group of people.”
—eighth-grade student

homework there and you get a snack and then on Wednesdays you get a free day. So maybe sometime if kids with disabilities came, you’d get to meet them there.

Some other students suggested activities that clubs could offer, like sports, games, pottery clubs, and so forth. A sixth-grade boy preferred games that were not really active. He added: “Maybe [it could be] a board game club where you can get time to talk with students with disabilities while you are doing the things.”

Let Students With Disabilities Take the Same Bus as Us
Students with disabilities often require a specialized transportation system, like a wheelchair-accessible van; but, interestingly, some of the students did not like the separate transportation. A sixth-grade boy said, “Because they [students with disabilities] used their bus, people do not talk to the kids on the bus.”

A seventh-grade boy stated that students with disabilities did not go to after-school program because they did not have a bus to go to the program. Having all students with disabilities use the same school bus as other students may not always work; however, it is possible that one or two school buses could be made accessible for all students so all students could also be guaranteed access to any types of after-school activities.

Facilitation Strategies for Students Without Disabilities
Many students with friends with disabilities mentioned that many students could also take a more active role in the facilitation process. Most of their ideas stressed that students without disabilities needed to initiate contact with students with disabilities (see box, “Peer Suggestions for Student Facilitation Strategies”).

Peer Suggestions for Student Facilitation Strategies
- Talk to students with disabilities as you would talk to your friends. Think about how others feel rather than only thinking about yourself or how others might view you.
- Have positive attitudes toward students with disabilities and see their inner qualities. Don’t be judgmental about outward appearances.
- Those of you who have friends with disabilities should tell others that students with disabilities are not that different from other kids. Students will listen to your views more than they will listen to teachers’ views.
- Get to know students with disabilities better by volunteering. It’s fun; take a chance! What do you have to lose? You might find a new friend.

Have a Positive Attitude Toward Students With Disabilities and See Their Inner Qualities
Some of the students had ideas that seemed mature when they talked about people with disabilities. They thought that their peers needed to judge people on inner qualities, rather than their outward appearance. A sixth-grade girl said, “I think that people should not judge other people with disabilities by how they look on the outside, and they should judge people by their personality.”

Another same-grade girl also added, “Just be more positive all the time. Don’t walk around with a negative attitude and frown at them.”

Many students recommended activities that were free from the burden of academic content and where both students with and without disabilities could spend time together.

Students Who Have Friends With Disabilities Can Tell Others That Students With Disabilities Are Not Different From Other Kids
The students believed that peers who had friends with disabilities needed to play a bigger role in getting other peers involved with students with disabilities. For instance, a sixth-grade girl said,

[I] think that people who have a friend who has a disability should tell their other friends who don’t have disabilities that it doesn’t matter if they had a disability or not, because they can still be a nice person. They’re not different.

Another sixth-grade girl told us, “I think if your peers told you, since you’re the same age, they listen more to you than they do to teachers.”

Students Without Disabilities
Facilitation Strategies for school activities.

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Another sixth-grade girl told us, “I think if your peers told you, since you’re the same age, they listen more to you than they do to teachers.”
Get to Know Students With Disabilities Better by Volunteering

Some of the students also indicated that others should help students with disabilities on a volunteer basis. A seventh-grade girl said,

There should be not like a program, but we should be able to be like one of their aides. Like each day have a different person be their aide. Like in their classrooms, too. See what they do, see like how they do things, like walk with them in the hallway and eat lunch. See what they talk about, what they do for fun, and stuff like that.

Final Thoughts

In addition to the views expressed here about facilitation, several individuals also mentioned that students with disabilities needed to assume some responsibility for the friendship process; this idea could help students with disabilities feel more self-determined about making friendships (Wehmeyer, 1999), and certainly, their voices should be heard.

Most of the strategies suggested by the students were ones that only created the opportunity for students to get to know and understand more about each other. Unfortunately, there is little evidence that shows that these strategies are effective; more research has been focused on changing the social skills of students with disabilities, but even these social skill training strategies are not always effective (e.g., Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001).

References


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“Get some of your friends and then put a person with a disability in there. It’s not like one-on-one, but it’s a group of people.”—eighth-grade student

[possible pull-quotes]