

# ***Power in Friendship Toolkit***

There is nothing more heartwarming than watching your child make a friend.  
The smiles, the giggles, the hugs and the play puts a smile on any face.

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Inclusion Project



## Table of Contents

What is Inclusion?.....	1
Making Inclusive Friendships.....	2
Power in Friendship Infographic.....	4
How to Host an Inclusive Birthday Party.....	6
Games ALL Kids Can Play.....	7

# What is Inclusion?

## What Is Inclusion?

**Inclusion means everyone can participate and everyone can belong.**

Inclusion means that children of all abilities are able to build friendships and participate in activities together. This toolbox is focused on building friendships, but the work of the National Inclusion Project extends to training professionals on how to foster inclusion in recreational activities, afterschool programs, and camp settings.

## Why is Inclusion Important?

“Why can’t I go, too?” He couldn’t say the words, but the look in his eyes conveyed the message clearly, as he watched his sister bound from the car to join the other children heading to day camp—swimming towels in hand, calling out to each other as they anticipated a full day of fun and activities.

From the rearview mirror, Diane saw the expression on Mike’s face, and it pierced a mother’s heart. For Mike—a young man with autism—it was another hurtful reminder.

For parents of children with disabilities, there are moments of dread: Recognizing a child’s longing to be included, knowing all too keenly the profound pain of being left out, and wanting desperately to make it better.

For children with physical and developmental disabilities, and for those who love them, there is a strong desire to belong. But the obstacles can seem insurmountable.

By teaching children to welcome others into their world, the principles of inclusion can help foster a greater sense of cooperation and empathy in the next generation.

Some limitations to inclusion are practical (such as knowledge, equipment, and curriculum); others are less tangible (such as public awareness and societal shifts in thinking). The National Inclusion Project works every day to make the inclusion of children with disabilities a reality. Since our inception, we have made a real impact by ensuring that children nationwide can experience things that many children take for granted: summer camp, recreational activities, and more.

## Kids Excel When There Is Inclusion

Studies have found that children with disabilities benefit from being in inclusive environments. A study in *Psychological Science* found that when children with disabilities are placed in an inclusive classroom they gained more language skills than when placed in a classroom with only peers who are disabled. Furthermore, typically developing children’s language skills are not set back by being with children with disabilities. Including children who are typically developing and children with disabilities allows more one-on-one time than teachers can provide. Children with disabilities have the opportunity to observe, imitate, and model the language use of their peers.

When we include all children in activities, all can benefit.

# Making Inclusive Friendships

Making friends is hard for kids, but it can also be hard for parents. Parents of children who are typically developing are often afraid of saying the wrong thing, and offending parents of children with disabilities. Parents of children with disabilities are heartbroken when their child isn't invited to events or asked to participate in a non-inclusive environment.

At the National Inclusion Project, we don't see this as a lack of trying, but a lack of understanding. This toolbox seeks to help all parents get the tools they need to help friendships bloom. While there is no way to "force" a friendship, this toolbox improves the possibility that a friendship can be forged between children.

These tips are meant to be inclusive of all parents. Helping friendships bloom is a "team" effort involving both sets of parents. This resource hopes to be a bridge so all parents can see the benefits for their children.

As we've all experienced in our own childhood, it feels really good to be asked to come over and play. Parents can make this feeling of inclusion happen for all the children in their lives.

**Take these steps to plant the seeds of friendship:**

## 1. Check Your Own Attitude

Do you think inclusion is possible? Can you envision your child making friends with a child with disabilities? Can you envision your child making friends with a child without disabilities? IT IS POSSIBLE. You just have to be pro-active and intentional about creating a setting where friendship can bloom.

## 2. Be Real With Your Fears

Do you have fears about your child being friends with a child who may be very different from them? Are you worried they will be hurt or taken advantage of? Will your child ask you questions that are hard to answer? It is okay to be afraid of what is different. The power of friendship will help you see that all children want the same things: companionship and belonging. Do not let your own fears be the roadblock to the power of friendship.

## 3. Plan Play With Purpose

Being intentional about creating time to play allows friendships to bloom. Talk to the parents beforehand to share play styles, personalities, things that work, things that don't, etc. Start with a playtime or play date at a neutral location like a playground or park where the children can play and parents can get to know each other. Have a few activities planned that might get the ball rolling with the kids. Take it slow. Work your way from staying with your child during the time to a drop-off time to perhaps even a sleepover. But don't rush and be willing to take steps back if needed. These tips can be used well into the teen years. Plan play with purpose until you see children creating a bond that doesn't need as much guidance.

# Making Inclusive Friendships

## 4. Give It Extra Time

Embarking on a new friendship is sometimes fast, but many times it is a slow burn. Build a little extra time in your playdate schedule to allow for the children to warm up to and transition into different activities. This also might mean that you create special time before or after events, like birthday parties, to allow children with different abilities to play together. Plan ahead and be prepared that it might take extra time, but it's worth it!

## 5. Be Open to Questions and Comments

Every unanswered question is a detour on the road to friendship. When children ask questions and make comments, it can come from a place of curiosity, fear, or meanness. In the heat of the moment, it can certainly feel like every question is out of meanness, but mostly it's just about wanting to know more. Try this the next time you are faced with a tough question about a child that is different:

- Always start with "What do you mean?" This gives the child a chance to add more information, but it also allows you to take a breath, check your attitude, and answer with patience.
- Then try these conversation starters:
  - **Relate back to your child** – Show your child how an action or behavior is a similar way to how he or she expresses their own actions/behaviors. Do they also make noise or jump when they get excited? That is the way a child with a disability also shows their excitement.
  - **Relate back to yourself** – Make your own experience or appearance the example. Share personal tastes, experiences, or unique factors that relate yourself to the child with the disability.
  - **Connect the children to explore the answer** – A vast majority of parents and children want to talk about their disability. It can help a child self-advocate, to talk about their disability in a safe, curious environment. Start a conversation with the child with a disability and the child asking a question.
  - **Always start with "What do you mean?"** – This gives the child a chance to add more information, but it also allows you to take a breath, check your attitude, and answer with patience.
- You also can say, "I don't know, but I'll find out." However, ALWAYS make sure you do. Children forget nothing.

## 6. Be Forgiving With Yourself, the Children and the Parents

There are going to be mistakes. There are going to be awkward silences after an unintentionally stupid thing is said. The kids might accidentally hurt each other. It's okay. Making friends is hard work, and it can be harder when you are trying to make a big change. Be gentle with yourself. Apologize for any misspoken words or unintentional insensitivities. Figure out safer ways to play together. This friendship is more important than your pride. You can do this!

## 7. Let Kids Be Kids

Once you've planted these seeds, just step back and let them grow. Children are pretty amazing when they're left alone without an adult fretting over them. You have been intentional by setting up an environment for friendship. Let it grow and bloom!

Want more ideas on how to harness the Power in Friendship? [Sign up for our monthly eNewsletter!](#)

# Power in Friendship Infographic

See the **POWER** in *Friendship*

No child needs to be without friends.  
Tips on how to build inclusive friendships!



NATIONAL INCLUSION PROJECT





**Making friends is hard for kids, but it can also be hard for parents.** Parents of children with disabilities can be heartbroken when their child does not have many friends. Parents of children who are typically developing are often afraid of saying the wrong thing or not creating a safe environment.

Try these tips to help build inclusive friendships for your child:

**CHECK YOUR OWN ATTITUDE**

Can you see your child making inclusive friendships? **IT IS POSSIBLE.** Just be pro-active and let friendships bloom.





**BE REAL WITH YOUR FEARS**

Do not let your own fears be the roadblock to the power in friendship. Know that **all children want the same thing**—companionship and belonging.

**PLAN PLAY WITH PURPOSE**

Be intentional about creating time to play. Talk to the parents beforehand and meet in a neutral location like a playground.





# Power in Friendship Infographic



## GIVE IT EXTRA TIME

Build a little extra time in your playdate schedule so the children can warm up to and transition into different activities.

## BE OPEN TO QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

Every unanswered question is a detour on the road to friendship.

Check out [inclusionproject.org/friendship](http://inclusionproject.org/friendship) for tips on how to answer tough questions.



## BE FORGIVING WITH YOURSELF, THE CHILDREN AND THE PARENTS

There are going to be mistakes. There are going to be awkward silences after an unintentionally insensitive thing is said. This friendship is more important than your pride. **You can do this!**

## LET KIDS BE KIDS

Once you've planted these seeds, just step back and let them grow. You have intentionally set-up an environment for friendship. **Let it grow and bloom!**



To get more tips about how to harness the **Power in Friendship** for all children visit [inclusionproject.org/friendship/](http://inclusionproject.org/friendship/).

# How to Host an Inclusive Birthday Party

## Inclusive Party Tips

It can be heartbreaking for a child, and their parents, to discover they were not invited to a birthday party or event because of their disability. Parents of typically developing children are sometimes worried about adapting a party to be inviting and safe for the child with disabilities. At the National Inclusion Project, we do not see this as a lack of trying, but a lack of knowledge.

Try these tips the next time you want to make your child's birthday or event more inclusive:

### Take the extra step to invite the child and family personally

Add a hand-written note to the parent letting them know that you want their child at the event. Telling them how much your child values the friendship with their child will be touching and help open the door to inclusion.

### Offer some solutions to make it work

Parents with children with disabilities sometimes feel like they are intruding if they ask for special arrangements for their child. Parents of typically developing children can help by offering some solutions. See if these work for your next event:

- Offer 30 minutes extra time before the rest of the guests arrive for special one-on-one time.
- Modify activities to be inclusive for all children, and share your plans with the parents.
- Encourage the parents to stay for the party. It doesn't have to be a drop-off party for everyone.
- Share a flexible schedule. Offer the option to show up late and leave early to the party.

### Ask the other parent how you can include their child

While it's good to offer solutions, it's also important to make sure that parents feel their child will thrive. Opening the door to more conversation about the event will make it all run smoothly. Include your phone number or email on the invite to start a conversation.

### Be okay with a "No" or a No-Show

Being a parent, we all know that life doesn't always go as we plan. Sometimes things don't work out for a myriad of reasons both in our control and out. If you are up for it, keep inviting the child and their family to future playdates to show how much you value that relationship for your child. Read the "How to Help Your Child Make Inclusive Friendships" page for more tips.

**Want more ideas on how to harness the Power in Friendship?**

**Check out the [LET'S ALL PARTY](#) book in our store!**



# Games ALL Kids Can Play

## Games ALL Kids Can Play

All of the below listed games can be adapted to accommodate any and all participants.

### Tag

It seems that everyone knows how to play tag, but just in case it wasn't in your childhood game-playing repertoire, here is how you play. A group of kids decides who will start out as being "it." That person chases the other people around, trying to tag one of them with their hand. The newly tagged person is now "it." There is often the rule of "no tag-backs" where you can't tag the person who just tagged you. The game ends when everyone is tired of playing.

### Freeze Tag

A popular variation of tag where anyone tagged by the person who is "it" becomes frozen in place. They can be unfrozen if touched by someone who isn't "it" nor frozen. Making several people "it" allows for a more challenging, exciting game.

### TV Tag

A variation of Freeze Tag where the person unfreezing the frozen player has to call out a TV show title. That show then can't be used again during that game.

### Simon Says

This game can be played anywhere, even in a car or other small space. One person is Simon and starts by saying, "Simon says, <insert action here>." Everyone must then do the action. However, if Simon makes an action request without saying, "Simon says" to begin the request, anyone who does that action is out. The last person still playing in the end will be Simon for the next round.

### Four Square

This ball game is played on a square court further divided into four smaller squares, numbered one through four. One player stands in each of the squares with the highest ranked player in number one and lowest in number four. You bounce the ball among the players, bouncing once in the other person's square before that person catches it. The game also can be played with additional rules—either ones that exist, or ones that players make up—and can be decided however the players choose. Anyone who violates the rules will have to move down in the ranking or be eliminated with another player rotating in to square four.

# Games ALL Kids Can Play

## Parachute

Fun for kids of all ages, this game involves a large round parachute, preferably with handles, with people holding the parachute all around the edges. It helps if someone is in charge of telling people what to do. There are many different ways to play; here are a few ideas to get you started:

- Players ruffle the parachute up and down a little bit, all the way up and all the way down, or all the way up before running underneath and sitting on the edge of the parachute to create a bubble of air.
- Players place light objects—such as wiffle balls or beanbags—on top of the parachute and make them jump by ruffling it.
- One person can sit in the middle of the parachute and everyone ruffles it near the ground. If there is a smooth floor and a light child, the child can sit in the middle on top of the parachute and everyone else can walk partway around still holding the parachute edge. Then everyone pulls backward, spinning the child.

## Bottle Bash Soccer

In order to play this game properly, you will preferably need a soccer ball and at least ten clean 2 liter bottles filled with just enough water to keep them upright. Players should be divided into teams of two with at least four members per team. Once each team has created a line of five bottles 2 feet apart from each other and about 30 feet from the other team, it is time to begin. The goal is to knock down the opposing team's bottles while still protecting yours. Fortunately, no boundaries are set, allowing the ball to be kicked anywhere. Every time a bottle gets knocked down, possession of the ball is passed to the team who lost the bottle. This game is great for hand-eye coordination as well as learning the values of teamwork.