

Planting Seeds of Friendship

Making friends is hard for kids, but it can also be hard for their families. Families of children who are typically developing are often afraid of saying the wrong thing, and offending those of children with disabilities. Families 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 toolkit seeks to help all families get the tools they need to help friendships bloom. While there is no way to "force" a friendship, we can create possibilities for friendships to grow.

These tips are meant to be inclusive of all families. Helping friendships bloom is a team effort. We can work together to benefit all families and children involved.

As we've all experienced in our own childhood, it feels really good to be invited to come play. Families can nurture these memorable inclusive moments in simple everyday ways.

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. Being proactive and intentional about creating friendship-focused settings are important first steps.

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. Try not to let your fears limit their opportunities.

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3. Plan Play With Purpose

Being intentional about creating time for inclusive play. Talk to other families beforehand to share play styles, personalities, things that work, things that don't, etc. Start at a neutral location like a playground or park where the children can play and families 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, to a drop-off time, to perhaps even a sleepover. Don't rush and be willing to take steps back if needed. These tips can be used well into the teen years too. Plan play with purpose until you see children creating a bond that doesn't need as much guidance.



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 Forgiving

There are going to be mistakes. There might be awkward silences. Sometimes 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 pride. You can do this!

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6. 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 hurtful, 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.

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 – Many families 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.

You also can say, "I don't know, but I'll find out." However, ALWAYS make sure you do. Children forget nothing.

7. Let Kids Be Kids



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