



Building friendships

through the school years

A major reason many parents choose an **inclusive education** is that they want their son or daughter with disability to be known and valued in their local community, to make neighbourhood friends and develop the same range of relationships that other young people enjoy. It can be a heartbreaking when that doesn't happen, and sadly because there are many barriers for students with disability attempting to make friends, nurturing relationships between the student and their peers needs to be a priority for parents and schools.



As Sean grew, I found him great company, charming, generous, engaging, and I believed there were others who would find him so as well.

We were lucky to meet people who showed us the power of following a dream with focus and intention. I am quite sure that if we had not believed friendship was possible, if we had put it in the too hard basket, or thought we were powerless – Sean's life today would be very different.

My son, Sean, is now 25. He left school more than 6 years ago and while his school inclusion experiences were a mixed bag, he was fortunate to leave school with many significant friendships, even though there were many moments of heartache and soul-searching over the 12 years of school.



While I do not have a 10 step plan to making friends, I want to share some of what we learnt!



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Assumptions:

Often we bemoan the lack of friendships without being clear about our assumptions about friendships, which may or may not be helpful. Most of the time, people think “friendships just happen” and “there is nothing we can do if they don’t”. Many people often think that the barrier to friendships is exclusively about the “impairment”, but I think it is worth challenging that assumption. Most students with disability will face additional barriers to making and keeping friends – but impairment itself is not the barrier, and there is much that we CAN do to overcome barriers.

I always assume that while we cannot manufacture or “force” friendships, we can steadily invest in opportunities and strategies that make friendship more likely.

Sometimes the investments will bear fruit quickly and other times, we will only see the results over the longer term. I would always assume that there will be disappointments, rejection and hurt along the way – we cannot protect any of our kids from those experiences, but if we want a life rich in relationships, we need to act with intention and focus towards a vision of a life which includes deep and rewarding relationships.



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Barriers:

The biggest barrier to relationships is stigma. Students readily absorb messages based on devaluation of difference. While young children notice difference, often without judgment, eventually, most do absorb negative messages in our culture or transmitted within their families and even within the schools themselves - which is why more barriers are often noticed as students age! If we do not pay attention to the student's social image and standing, the devaluation gets amplified.

Often it is assumed that the barrier to friendships is the impairment, so the child with physical impairment can't participate in the same activities as others, the student with sensory impairment won't be able to connect with peers with an interest in music or art, the student with intellectual disability won't be able to meaningfully converse with peers etc.

The existence of impairment is not in itself a barrier – except where there has not been reasonable adjustments made to enable the student to participate.

So a student who uses a wheelchair who is not able to access the playground or participate in team sports because of a lack of physical access and adjustments misses out on opportunities. A student with intellectual impairment who does not have communication support to speak to peers or someone to help them understand the social rules of the playground will be disadvantaged. Or a student who has unmet needs which result in "challenging behaviours" may indeed be more at risk of rejection from peers. While we can find ways to support our sons and daughters, so they can communicate more effectively with their peers; so they can participate in games; so that "behaviour" does not overwhelm their identity, coming from a focus on "deficiency" is not the answer.

A big barrier is that we fail to honour the critical importance of friendships and so often decisions are made which unwittingly undermine the natural opportunities. Examples include the ubiquity of teacher aide support, pairing a student with an adult rather than a peer for activities, part-time attendance, withdrawal for special programs or placing the child in segregated classes. When a child is seated away from peers, does not participate in the same classroom activities or lacks adjustments which maximize participation, you introduce additional barriers to building relationships.

Adults can also interfere with the development of relationships by encouraging students without disability to be "kind" or "take care of" a student with disability, or by not tackling bullying behaviour. If adults do not role model respectful relationships, and unwittingly reinforce devaluation, the student's peers will be vulnerable to absorbing those messages.

Another barrier is not being conscious enough of "tending" relationships so they can grow. Very often, students with disability do need more to make the most of the opportunity for friendships – they need people to notice signs of interest and to encourage connection between peers, and they need more than a go with the flow approach.

Helping students with disability make friends is everyone's business so teachers, parents, other students and community allies, within and outside the school, can make a big difference.



Where to start:

For both parents and teachers, building relationships **starts with a strong belief that true friendship is possible** between students with and without disability. We need to undo a lot of unconscious thinking based on ableist and devaluing assumptions. We need to reject (often quite unconscious) ideas that a student with disability will always be a burden to others, an object of pity and charity for other students, and without significant gifts to share.

Sometimes it is not possible to influence the school to believe in the possibility of real friendships, and while this makes things harder, parents shouldn't give up hope but rather should take up other opportunities, like playdates and joining in extra curricular activities alongside their peers.

Both parents and school need to be **clear about the vision** – where we want to end up – imagining that future and using the vision to make decisions about where we put our efforts. If we only imagine “tolerance” for the child with disability or that they will be “somewhat present” we are unlikely to be successful.

The student must **BE THERE** in the same classrooms and playgrounds frequently and reliably.

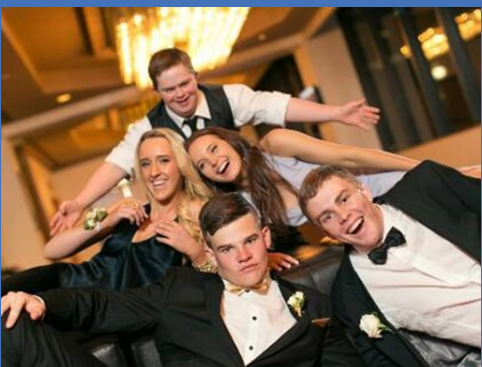
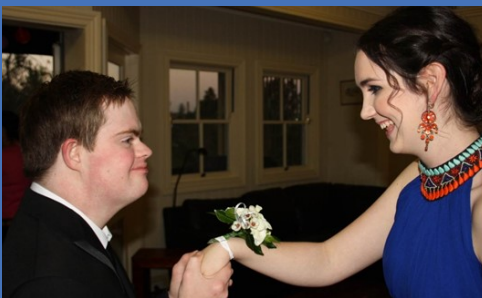
It helps to take the **ordinary paths** – helping the student to take up the most valued and typical opportunities for the person's age, gender, culture etc. That students needs MORE opportunities (not less) in the ordinary places to become known – so this means full participation in the life of the school – classroom learning, (including small group work, in class presentations), in excursions, and sports days and extra-curricular pursuits. It can also help for the child to be included in other age appropriate community groups, particularly as students grow older.

It is important to pay attention to the student's **gifts, passions and interests** – and find ways for those gifts to be recognized by other students. The student will need others to be good ambassadors to help the child be known for what they have to offer and also able to share mutual interests with peers.

A culture of noticing strengths in a classroom will go a long way to role-modelling these practices.



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Building Valued Roles

One of the most powerful tools for building relationships is through supporting the development of **valued roles** – role more than “activities” will provide opportunities for the student to be known and for connections to deepen.

We found we had to work on Sean being able to be *authentically* in the roles available (e.g. to make the most of school roles where they weren’t always offered to him) and we also had to ensure Sean wasn’t seen in devalued roles (e.g. menace, object of fun, eternal child).

Being in valued roles provided a way for Sean to be perceived differently and to be known. The roles gave Sean a way to make a contribution, and through roles, Sean developed skills and a sense of purpose and identity.

So Sean was a swim club member, an Auskick player, a circus troupe member, a ju-jitsu member, a soccer player, a volleyball cheer squad member, and a rugby team assistant. He was a concert performer, an assembly spokesperson, a fete volunteer, a mother’s day waiter and many other everyday school roles.

Finding ways to nurture relationships

Once Sean was participating in the ordinary path of regular school, we paid attention to the different circles of friendships and tried to invest in connections. This can look different for different people but it meant noticing a “click” or connection, checking in, inviting/initiating contact, being in places frequently, remembering birthdays, finding ways to go deeper.

We always used birthday parties and other celebrations as Sean has always loved to host his friends. We put effort into fun theming so it was a really valued and special occasion that reflected well on Sean.

We also looked at the ordinary paths to friendship for young children, which included organizing play dates, initiating school holiday movie or activity days, and also trying to initiate whole class activities (so no-one was excluded) like end of week park picnics.



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Think about how to support friendships:

It can be hard to influence what happens in the school day, but we knew that it helps to have connector/bridge builders within any group or setting. An adult support (like a teacher aid) can be a real barrier to friendships OR they can be helpful in scoping opportunities, noticing interest from other kids, helping the student find a common interest with a peer, as well as smoothing over rough spots, ensuring strengths are seen and working out what the student needs to do better in their relationships. Same age or older students and the classroom teacher can be great supports as well. Good support people are powerful role models (and so are bad supporters!). Finding someone in the school who is a good observer is very helpful – if they are able to notice the kids who your child is drawn to and vice-versa, and then gently provide opportunities for connection, you increase the chances of a relationship taking root. If the school is not on board, you can consider more formal strategies like a circle of support, or enlist other parents and their children to help you to do this work. Inviting kids into your home provides those same opportunities to observe.



Being an involved parent (P and C, school fete volunteer, reading helper, tuckshop helper etc) helped me understand a lot more about the opportunities in the school for Sean and also helped me to notice interactions and potential friends. Knowing other families also helped me when I was struggling with questions like “what are kids interested in at this age?” and made setting up playdates etc a lot more comfortable.

Understanding what holds us back!

If we seek relationships, we must be prepared to feel vulnerable. Often this felt a bit scary as there was always a fear of rejection. I learnt to “feel the fear and do it anyway”. It is easy to ignore offers of friendship, or be too tentative. Early on, I didn’t want to impose or felt unsure if people were just being kind. Sometimes I ignored the offers of friendship, or was too tentative about reaching out. But I did get better at saying “yes” to all good offers and also at closing the deal – setting a date and time rather than settling for “we must catch up soon”.



I had to go out of my comfort zone to initiate more play dates and all class activities, like organising an end of term social. If you are the organiser, and you do the leg work of communicating well with other families, there is a good chance of setting up an activity that will work for your child – and that other families will support.

Later on, I directly approached other parents and kids to try to set up social opportunities, when Sean couldn’t initiate these himself. It felt uncomfortable, particularly when Sean was a teenager, but it almost always had a positive response – with many more social opportunities – and often planted seeds so spontaneous opportunities were more forthcoming.



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What we learnt:

Be intentional ...

in whatever way works for you, be conscious of the current relationships – close friends and those who you think are open to more relationship. Keep a list (mental or written!) and think of ways you can nurture those relationships.

For us, knowing Sean's gift for hospitality and his "party boy" nature, **offering hospitality** – aka the party strategy was very effective. (It is important to find the way that works for you but again think of the "ordinary" ways people make friends and move deeper into relationships.

It is worth taking risks and this means leaving space for others. Don't fill every moment with therapy or disability activities, even walking to school with neighbourhood kids can provide opportunities for others to get to know your family member. In the midst of busy family life, make time for those simple opportunities.

Avoid some obvious mistakes.

For us, these were:

- Allowing Sean to be separated from his peers or allowing adults to be a barrier to friendship
- Retreating into a world of "special" – try to avoid the seduction of "special" – if we spend too long in disability specific places, we limit the opportunities to be known within the regular community.
- Placing too much expectation on a few friends rather than making sure Sean was known well in multiple friendship groups.
- Becoming resentful of the effort or just letting things slide

Being strategic and persevering

It is helpful to pay attention to the ordinary rhythms of childhood and teenage relationships – and help your child understand those.

Try to become a "detective" on what are the "in" things – games, movies, TV characters etc – better still if they link with an interest for your child. This doesn't mean quashing your child's interests but it can be helpful for them to "grow" into new interests. It is worth persevering on introducing new interests as a fixation on Hi-5 or the wiggles can be a barrier as kids can older. For Sean, Harry Potter became an interest which helped him connect with peers and in high school joining the rugby program (even though it wasn't a "natural" interest) provided great social credibility. We seized on this as it was such a wide participation sport at his school, highly valued, and there were lots of opportunities for frequent participation. If he had been interested in chess, we may have done that alongside rugby, but being strategic can mean thinking about the opportunities for frequent contact with peers and those opportunities which "make sense" in your school, and to do the thinking about how to use that activity and interest to build connection e.g. organizing a Harry Potter theme drinks stall during book week, helping out at the rugby training, being a member of the chess club committee.



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Summary points:

You must BELIEVE

Your vision must be stronger than the naysayers – ignore those who tell you, for example, that the “gap is getting wider” and that real friendships are unrealistic.

You need to be a strong ambassador for the person – sharing their gifts and strengths and always talking about them positively and enthusiastically so others can SEE them.

You have to BE THERE to make friends – in the ordinary places, as Janet Klees stresses “over and over again”. Being in the same places frequently and predictably over time is very powerful.

Avoid the obvious mistakes (separation from peers, too much pressure, becoming resentful).

Keep looking out for those who “click” or are open – and try to figure out next steps to take the connection deeper.

You need to take risks and build courage.

Be forgiving – don’t dwell on disappointments.

Sometimes we have to grow a thicker skin and go where we are not immediately welcome and to forgive those who disappoint. Kids (and adults) can be fickle; don’t write off those who have been friends in the past – but do aim for multiple friendships to buffer against changing loyalties.

Make relationships a priority and offer small acts of friendship – help the person to make calls, offer small gifts, be a thoughtful friend in good times and in bad times.

Try to be a detective about what the valued roles and by looking for valued roles and opportunities.

Be stubborn about what your son or daughter deserves.

Cling to the ordinary! Keep going! Persist!

Keep believing always in the beauty and worth of your son or daughter. Know that they have much to offer the world – and that it is a privilege to help them find the places and people where those gifts will be warmly embraced.

Helpful resources:

A version of these ideas in a video presentation entitled “The Grass is Greener where you water it” is available on **Conversations that Matter**.

Reflections on friendship by David and Faye Wetherow

<http://www.communityworks.info/articles/friendship.htm>

Moving from Activity to Connection: stop cooking and start looking by David and Faye Wetherow

<http://www.communityworks.info/articles/activity.htm>



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