Autism and Good Friendship: Fostering Healthy Neurodiverse Relationships
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Learning Objectives

1. Learn strategies for fostering neurodiverse friendships across environments.

2. Frame peer education as social emotional learning that prevents bullying and disability harassment.

What have you tried historically?

How can I create community in a classroom with so many different types of learners?

Respect children’s intelligence

What gets lost when we share a message of “We’re all different”?
What is “neurodiversity”?  

A collection of neurotypes  
➔ neuromajority  
➔ neurodivergent  

Other associated terms:  
➔ neurotypical  
➔ neurodivergence  
➔ Neurodiversity paradigm: a recognition that there is a continuum of neurological experience, and an appreciation for diversity.

Why does it matter?  

Shouldn’t educators focus on reading, writing, and arithmetic?

Importance of peer acceptance  

*With a Little Help from My Friends*  
*The Importance of Peer Relationships for Social-Emotional Development*  

“Children without these [age-appropriate social-emotional] skills are often rejected by peers and pushed to the margins of the social group — a position that is maintained through bi-directional negative interactions”

Culture of kindness, acceptance

“Social-emotional programming can boost the social-emotional skills of all children, support individual children who have more intensive social needs and improve their peer relationships, and create peer contexts that are more tolerant and supportive of individual differences.”

Issue brief, created by The Pennsylvania State University

4 types of bullying of autistic victims

- verbal / cyberbullying
- physical
- experimental
- relational / exclusion

Resources: PACER

- Students with Disabilities and Bullying: Top five things for parents, educators, and students to know
  - disability harassment
  - denial of FAPE
- Kids Against Bullying (Elementary)
- Teens Against Bullying
- National Bullying Prevention Center: October is National Bullying Prevention Month

Good Friend, Inc.'s mission:

AWARENESS
- Name it to explain it!
- Use accurate, consistent terminology.

ACCEPTANCE
- awareness ≠ understanding
- acceptance → accommodations

EMPATHY
- feeling it → natural support
- Fosters genuine responses.
Benefits of intervening with peers

- Autism is present in 3% of children. Educating the *neuromajority* level sets the social playing field.
- Speaking openly about neurodiversity gives children *vocabulary to describe themselves*. (progressive conversation)
- *Representation matters*. Showcasing neurodivergent achievers gives learners hope for their future.
- *Decrease in bullying behavior*. Connecting as “we”, not “us” and “them”.

Five Friendship Fostering Strategies

1. **Model Acceptance.** How you interact with neurodivergent students matters. Are you presuming competence?
2. **Teach that Differences Are Great!** How boring would it be if we all looked, talked, played, and learned the same way?
3. **Get Specific.** It’s not enough to say, “We’re all different.” Appreciate children’s intelligence by explaining *how*.
4. **Get Buy-in.** Never disclose a child’s personal information without parent or guardian permission. Ideally, the child should be the one to self-disclose.
5. **Interactive Exercises Build Empathy.** “Step in another’s shoes!”

Resources: Good Friend’s student services

- **General Assemblies:** 5K-8th grade students learn about autism and peer acceptance in developmentally-specific groups (prefer no more than three consecutive grade spans).
- **Peer Sensitivity Workshops:** Elementary school students may learn about a specific classmate on the spectrum. Great way to build empathy!
- **Individualized Classroom Presentations:** Middle school students get a platform for self-disclosure through a tailored presentation.

Resource: Peer education film

- K-5th grade (elementary school, ages 5-11)
- Music video by *The Figureheads* with more than *55,000* YouTube views!
Resource: Peer education film

- 6th-8th grade (middle school, ages 11-14)
- 20-minute run time

Tools: Culture of kindness, acceptance promotes neurodiversity

Online resources to
- increase educators' capacity to
- improve the social-emotional environment of their neurodiverse classrooms through
- autism awareness, acceptance, and empathy-inspiring student services
- developmentally specific to K-2nd grade, 3rd-5th grade, and 6th-8th grade
Talk back

- What's your **biggest takeaway**?
- What **surprised** you?
- What **confirmed** what you already knew?
- What do you want to **learn more** about?
- What **challenges** have you faced?
- Other questions, comments?