

# BEST BUDDIES INTERNATIONAL

## ELEMENTARY PROGRAM



### INTRODUCTION & RECRUITMENT RESOURCE

Best Buddies is an organization dedicated to establishing a global volunteer movement that creates opportunities for one-to-one friendships, integrated employment and leadership development for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Best Buddies programs foster social opportunities and cultivates friendship, inclusion and leadership for people with and without disabilities throughout school and into adulthood.

At the elementary level, Best Buddies offers a rich and diverse way to teach awareness, integrate students with disabilities with their peers and nurture genuine friendships for students of all abilities. The goal of the program at the elementary level is to introduce opportunities for peers with and without disabilities to learn, play and grow together. Educating students about disability awareness at a young age is important before stereotypes and prejudices are formed, which often leads to an isolating school experience for people with IDD.

Best Buddies Elementary provides teachers with the tools to support the mission of inclusion and awareness on campus, provides students with and without IDD to develop their leadership skills at a young age and fosters an environment of tolerance and acceptance on campus.



### INTRODUCING BEST BUDDIES

Best Buddies is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that positively impacts over 900,000 individuals with and without disabilities through eight formal programs - Middle Schools, High Schools, Colleges, Citizens, e-Buddies, Jobs, Ambassadors and Promoters.

Founded in 1989 by Anthony K. Shriver at Georgetown University, Best Buddies has grown in over 2,000 elementary, middle, high school and college chapters worldwide. Best Buddies programs engage participants in each of the 50 U.S. states and in over 50 countries across the world.

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### RESEARCH

In 2015, Best Buddies expanded its Promoters program - which focuses on promoting leadership and disability awareness in groups, opposed to one-to-one matches - to elementary schools nationwide. Based on research compiled by the Early Childhood Research and Practice, specifically the *Children's Friendship Development: A Comparative Study* of 2011, Best Buddies recognized the need and value of building a social program introducing the concepts of Best Buddies at a young age.

Evidence supports the need for social interventions at a young age, as "establishing friendships is an important developmental goal of early childhood. Friendships established during the preschool years create valuable contexts to learn and practice skills essential to children's social, cognitive, communicative and emotional development" (Yu, Ostrosky & Fowler, 2011).

Recognizing the key development factors - and noting the proven research that highlights the importance of feeling a sense of belonging - Best Buddies strives to meet the needs of youth with and without disabilities by fostering opportunities for mutually enriching friendships, group socialization and team building.

"Many young children with disabilities show uneven and insecure growth in social interactions and often fail to resolve conflicts with peers in appropriate ways. As a result, children with disabilities tend to be less accepted and often rejected by peers who perceive them as less socially competent." The goal of Best Buddies is to mitigate social isolation for people with disabilities, by promoting interactions at a young age and education students on social awareness, tolerance and relationship development before students with disabilities lose the opportunity to be seen as equals and develop friendships at a comfortable and natural pace.

By developing a program focused on chapter activities, group work and leadership development opportunities for students with and without disabilities, the early interactions will mitigate the challenges students with IDD face in making social connections throughout the education experience. Best Buddies strives to make these opportunities informative, engaging and most importantly, fun for all participants.

**"Although young children with disabilities often experience limited success in developing friendships, this does not mean that friendships do not exist for them."**

**"Researchers have subsequently suggested various ways to support children's social interactions and facilitate friendships between children with and without disabilities."**

## **RECRUITING STUDENTS**

In starting the Best Buddies Elementary program on campus, Faculty Advisors who will serve as the program leads must identify which students are best suited to participate. Administrators and Faculty Advisors can select specific classrooms to participate or gather students from various grade levels throughout the school. In establishing a new elementary program, it is recommended that a school begins with introducing a specific class or targeted group of students the first year. As the program develops, advisors can determine if they would like to add other grade levels, classes, etc. to participate.

Best Buddies recommends that two to three teachers serve as the Best Buddies advisors for the first year to support the program and plan activities for the chapter members. At least one of these advisors should be the teacher of a self-contained classroom or a special education lead.

For schools who wish to include all students in the Best Buddies program, recruitment and education must be more widespread. Best Buddies has found success in building a strong base of participants by working with faculty to select peers both with and without IDD. These students can be empowered to further identify other peers who would be best suited for the program. In successful, piloted elementary programs, Best Buddies staff and advisors have met with students recommended by their teachers to explain the program and help promote it on their respective campuses. The idea that being that students can share the mission of the program on their own is both empowering and enticing and thus promotes interest.

Faculty are encouraged to also share the opportunity within their classes, communities and school districts to create further interest. Using resources and accessible materials available on the Best Buddies University website, both students and advisors can easily promote the program to parents, students and community members. Following student and faculty promotion on campus, an organized informational meeting with potential or selected members should be held to explain the program and its goals.



## CHAPTER MEETINGS & ACTIVITIES

In addition to recruiting targeted classrooms or students, Faculty Advisors must identify a suitable time to host chapter activities. Based on feedback from the piloted programs, it is recommended that elementary chapters meet during the school day, either during class time, lunch or recess. Meetings should be held at an inclusive time for all students to participate.

Chapters are required to meet a minimum of twice a semester; a total of four times per academic year. In addition to meeting as a chapter, advisors are encouraged to offer opportunities for students during the school day to connect with their peers with IDD to form connections and foster friendships naturally. Offering opportunities for students to pair up and read together, enjoy lunch or play outside at recess, will serve as a way to normalize and cultivate strong friendships.

## REFERENCES

- Fowler, Susan A.; Ostrosky, Michaelene M.; Yu, SeonYeong. (2011). *Children's Friendship Development: A Comparative Study*, [ecru.uiuc.edu](http://ecru.uiuc.edu)