Evidence Based Support for Best Buddies Programs

Best Buddies International is the world's largest organization dedicated to ending the social, physical, and economic isolation of the 200 million people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Our mission is to establish a global volunteer movement that creates opportunities for one-to-one friendships, integrated employment, leadership development and inclusive living for people with IDD.

Best Buddies' Friendship programs are bridging the gap that exists between students with and without disabilities. Our school chapters foster leadership skills in all members and each chapter includes an inclusive group of student officers who work in partnership with faculty advisors to plan and facilitate inclusive social and educational activities each month. Members have an opportunity to be matched in one-to-one friendships to form meaningful connections that have the potential to last a lifetime.

Feeling included in society is a critical factor in a person’s well-being. “Interpersonal relationships are not often discussed as a need for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), yet they play an important role, especially for people with disabilities, who are at a higher risk of being marginalized and experiencing diminished self-esteem” (Gotto, Calkins, Jackson, Walker, Beckmann, 2010).

Fostering social connections and developing peer relationships is integral for school aged children; however, students with IDD “interact infrequently with their peers and struggle to make social connections” (Brock et al. 2016). The National Longitudinal Transition Study of 2012, Preparing for Life After High School: The Characteristics and Experiences of Youth in Special Education, states that students with disabilities continue to struggle after school and indicates that we need to pay more attention to how students are prepared to live independently beyond their school career with positive peer relationships and opportunities for self-advocacy. “Self-advocacy and self-determination include the abilities to select personal goals, plan steps toward goals, assess one's progress, make choices, and self-monitor and self-evaluate one's behaviors” (Kleinert, Jane O'Regan, et al. Teaching Exceptional Children 43.2, 2010).

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 these years create valuable contexts to learn and practice skills essential to children's social, cognitive, communicative and emotional development" (Yu, Ostrosky & Fowler, 2011).

Recognizing these key developmental 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 educating 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 their education experience. Best Buddies strives to make these opportunities informative, engaging and most importantly, fun for all participants. To learn more, visit www.bestbuddies.org.