

Helping All Students Build Connections

- ▶ When students experience positive social interactions and acceptance from their peers, they show improvements in social skills and self-esteem, transition and communications skills, and language and intellectual development.
- ▶ Children and young people who do not have exceptionalities often report that being with students who have disabilities improves their self-concept, social awareness, and acceptance of differences.
- ▶ Helping children develop healthy friendships is one of the most important goals that most parents have for their children.

But for some children making friends isn't always easy. It is a skill that everyone can improve with learning opportunities and practice.

- ▶ For children who have them, Individual Education Plans (IEPs) often include social and friendship related goals and strategies.

You can help with this important part of your child's health and wellness by working with your school on the following strategies.

Develop a Friendship Mindset

- ▶ Be aware of the quantity and quality of your child's social opportunities ... in the classroom, in school-wide activities, and in before and after school programs. Are the opportunities enough? Can more be done?
- ▶ Talk with your child's teacher about how your child interacts with other students. Ask questions and work together to make sure your child feels comfortable and included.
- ▶ Ask about whether your child is being encouraged to do the same things other students are doing in school and in the community. If not, why? What can be done to help them be included as much as possible?
- ▶ If your child has one, talk with the school team that helps your child about appropriate social goals to include in the IEP.

- ▶ Understand the importance of your child interacting with peers, not just spending time with adults, such as teachers and other school support staff. Work together with the school to make sure your child has opportunities to be independent and spend time with other students whenever possible.
- ▶ Talk to your child about how people are and are not alike. Emphasize that differences are not bad. Diversity is a strength.
- ▶ Talk with your child about how to interpret other students' behaviours. Help them understand body language and other ways people communicate that may not be obvious. Some students find it difficult to read non-verbal cues.
- ▶ Prepare your child for social interactions by practicing together what they can say to other students.
- ▶ Build your child's confidence by talking about their strengths. Reassure them that everyone finds it difficult to make friends sometimes, but we all get better at this when we try and practice.
- ▶ Believe your child can not only develop friendships, but would make a wonderful friend – and make sure school staff demonstrate the same attitude!