

## Helping All Students Build Friendships

Building positive relationships with others is important for all children – including students who have exceptionalities and special support needs.

- ▶ Enjoying friendships helps increase students' sense of connectedness to school and improves their attendance.
- ▶ When students experience positive social interactions and acceptance from their peers, they show improvements in their social skills and self-esteem, communication skills, and language and intellectual development.
- ▶ Helping children develop healthy friendships is one of the most important goals that most parents have for their children.

For some children, making friends comes easily. For others, it can be more difficult.

The good news is, making friends is a skill that everyone can improve with learning opportunities and practice.

**You can help with this important part of your child's well-being by working with your school on the following strategies.**

- ▶ 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? Be aware of their opportunities for shared activities and talk to the school if you are unsure.
- ▶ Find out if students are being deliberately taught friendship skills. Are there ways you can reinforce what they are learning at home?
- ▶ Talk with school staff about how your child interacts with other students. Ask questions and work together to make sure your child feels comfortable and included.
- ▶ Talk to your child about how people are and are not alike. Emphasize that differences are not bad. Diversity is a strength.

- ▶ Help your child be prepared for social interactions. Practice what they can say to their peers and how they can act with others. Help them learn to share interesting things about themselves.
- ▶ Build your child's confidence by talking about their strengths. If your child needs some encouragement, reassure them that everyone finds it difficult to make friends sometimes. Tell them we all get better at this when we try and practice.

## What About Students Who Have Exceptionalities?

**Sometimes, making friends can be more challenging for students who have some types of exceptionalities or diverse abilities.**

- ▶ For children who have them, Individual Education Plans (IEPs) often include social and friendship related goals and strategies. If your child has an IEP, talk with the school team that helps your child to find out what social goals might be right for them. You can request that the goals focus on things that are important to you and your child.
- ▶ Understand the importance of your child interacting with other students – 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 their peers. Simply being in a classroom may not be enough to help all students with friendship building. Talk to school staff about how they can create structured, intentional opportunities for your child to interact with one or two positive peers.
- ▶ Talk with your child about how to interpret other students' behaviours. Some students find it difficult to read "non-verbal" cues, like body language and other ways people might communicate.
- ▶ Ask about how the school encourages other students to engage with your child in ways that foster understanding and celebrate the diversity of children and teens.
- ▶ 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?
- ▶ Believe your child can not only develop friendships, but would make a wonderful friend – and make sure school staff share the same attitude!