Fostering Friendships:
Supporting Relationships Among Youth With and Without Developmental Disabilities

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Friendships matter. This simple statement encapsulates decades of research addressing the social lives of American adolescents. The relationships youth have with peers who share interests, activities, and other affiliations in common can have a substantial influence on the quality of life youth experience during and after high school. Indeed, thousands of studies highlight the contributions friendships can make to the social and academic development of youth, but also warn of the deleterious consequences associated with their absence (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011). Through their friendships with same-age peers, youth find companionship, access emotional and practical supports, learn new skills, experience a sense of belonging, and—most of all—have fun. Indeed, research affirms what we all recognize first hand in our own lives—knowing and being known by others within the context of a friendship is an important aspect of what helps young people to flourish.

In the very same way, friendships matter for youth and young adults with developmental disabilities. As many as 2% to 3% of adolescents living in every single community across the country have an intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, or some other type of developmental disability (Boyle et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The friendships these young people develop can help support participation in a range of school and community activities, enhance school satisfaction, improve overall well-being, help them learn important norms and values, and contribute to improved outcomes in the early years after leaving high school (Carter, 2011; Test et al., 2009). And like any other high school student, youth with disabilities deeply desire such relationships.

The critical difference for young people with developmental disabilities is that friendships remain especially elusive during and after high school. Although many students with disabilities spend their school days in the close company of a host of educators, paraprofessionals, related service providers, and other specialists, relationships with same-age peers—especially peers without significant disabilities—are the exception rather than the rule. Consider findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (Wagner, Cadwallader, & Marder, 2003). A nationally representative sample of parents was asked about the relationships and social participation of their children with disabilities during secondary school. Half (50.6%) of youth with autism and nearly one quarter (24.8%) of youth with an intellectual disability had *never* been invited by other students to social activities (e.g., at their home, to a party) during the past twelve months. A large proportion of students with autism (83.5%) or intellectual disability (41.5%) were reported to *never* or *rarely* receive telephone calls from friends. And nearly half of youth with autism (44.3%) and almost one-sixth (16.4%) of students with intellectual disability reported *never* spending time together with friends outside of school during the past year. Other descriptive studies highlight this all-too-common narrative: meaningful relationships among students with and without disabilities are unlikely to develop apart from intentional efforts (Carter, Hughes, Guth, & Copeland, 2005; Carter, Sisco, Brown, Brickham, & Al-Khabbaz, 2008).

These data suggest an overlooked opportunity in many high schools. Students with and without developmental disabilities frequently miss out on the chance to ever meet one another, to both receive and give a range of helpful supports, to discover the interests and aspirations they share in common, and to learn about and from someone whose experiences in life may differ markedly from their own. Although adolescent friendships develop and dissolve for reasons that can be difficult for adults to always anticipate, schools and communities can still take practical steps to increase the likelihood that students have meaningful opportunities to encounter one another and, perhaps, develop a new friendship. In this article, we provide an overview of research-based approaches for promoting interactions and relationships among adolescents with developmental disabilities and their peers in school and community settings.

ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO FRIENDSHIPS

Expanding Shared Activities: Addressing Opportunity Barriers
Evolving legislation, policies, and public attitudes are challenging secondary (and even postsecondary) schools to think differently about where students with developmental disabilities spend their day and the ways in which their participation and learning is supported. Adopting more inclusive service delivery approaches is one avenue for expanding the opportunities transition-age students have to learn alongside and get to know their classmates with disabilities. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2010), 36% of secondary students with autism and 17% of students with intellectual disability now spend most or all of their day (80% or more) in classes with their peers without disabilities; one-fifth (20%) of secondary students with autism and 26% of students with intellectual disability spend some of their day (i.e., between 40% to 79%) in these inclusive settings. However, a substantial

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proportion of adolescents with autism (45%) or intellectual disability (57%)—especially those with more extensive support needs—have few or no opportunities to meet peers without disabilities because they receive almost all of their education in self-contained classrooms or in entirely separate schools. Supporting these students' access to the range of rigorous and relevant learning experiences that exist in any given school is consistent with recommended practices in the field of transition education and the mandates of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004.

At the same time, efforts to increase shared activities should not focus narrowly on the classroom. Extracurricular clubs, afterschool activities, cafeterias, hallways, and other non-instructional settings provide rich contexts within which students spend time and have the opportunity to deepen relationships with their peers. Although studies addressing inclusion in these settings are fairly few (Carter et al., 2005; Kleinert et al., 2007; Wagner et al., 2003), these are the very social contexts from which students with developmental disabilities may be most isolated.

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Equipping Peers: Addressing Attitudinal Barriers

Although students with developmental disabilities should have access to inclusive classrooms, extracurricular activities, workplaces, and community activities, a shift in location may not automatically lead to frequent interactions, new friendships, or a deeper sense of belonging. Even though attitudes toward disabilities have been steadily shifting (Siperstein, Norins, & Mohler, 2007), some adolescents may still be reluctant to spend time with their classmates with developmental disabilities because of limited prior experiences or inaccurate stereotypes. Other students may not feel confident about exactly how to interact with someone who does not speak, uses an augmentative communication device, requires additional supports, or behaves in unexpected or atypical ways.

Providing peers with accurate, relevant information and guidance on basic interaction strategies can equip them with the confidence and competence to work with and get to know their classmates with developmental disabilities. Such awareness efforts may be most effective when targeted to provide information about a particular student's strengths and interests, communication style, school involvement, and individual support needs. However, many schools also undertake schoolwide initiatives aimed at promoting disability awareness more broadly, emphasizing inclusion as a core value, and inviting students to become more actively involved in making their school a welcoming place for all students. Collectively, these awareness efforts are aimed at removing any initial hesitation students may have about getting to know their classmates with developmental disabilities.

Adult Facilitation: Addressing Support Barriers

The manner in which adolescents with significant disabilities are sometimes supported to participate in school and community activities may inadvertently limit their opportunities to develop relationships with their peers without disabilities. Schools and community programs often rely heavily on individually assigned (one-to-one) adult supports—usually paraprofessionals, special educators, or even parents—to support students' involvement in classrooms, clubs, cafeterias, or community activities throughout and even after the school day. Although usually well intentioned,

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the close and constant presence of school staff may make peers reluctant to initiate conversations, can reinforce perceptions of differences, and might encourage students with disabilities to turn first to adults for needed support rather than to more natural sources of supports (e.g., peers, co-workers, teammates). By adopting a facilitative rather than direct support role, school staff can place more focus on actively encouraging interactions, collaborative work, and shared activities among students with disabilities and their peers. For example, paraprofessionals might model ways for students to interact with one another; demonstrate how to communicate with someone who uses a computerized communication system; redirect questions and comments to students or their peers; highlight shared interests and other similarities among students; or assign classroom responsibilities that require interaction. In other words, these direct facilitation strategies can create connections among students and inter-dependence, while enabling paraprofessionals to fade their support.

FOSTERING FRIENDSHIPS THROUGH NATURAL SUPPORT STRATEGIES

By expanding shared activities, equipping peers, and encouraging adult facilitation, school and community programs can create contexts within which students with and without developmental disabilities might be more likely to interact with one another and, perhaps, develop friendships. To fully maximize these opportunities, however, peer-mediated support strategies are now considered a recommended and evidence-based practice for promoting relationships and learning for adolescents with developmental disabilities (Carter & Kennedy, 2006; Carter, Sisco, Chung, & Stanton-Chapman, 2010). These interventions are designed to capitalize on the most natural source of support widely available in any school or community: peers. We briefly describe three such approaches that are either widely used or have already garnered strong empirical support.

Peer Support Arrangements

Peer support arrangements are advocated as an effective approach for supporting learning and social participation within inclusive secondary classrooms. These individually tailored interventions involve equipping two or more peers without disabilities to provide academic and/or social support to a classmate with significant

disabilities across the semester or school year if the class extends across semesters. Peers receive ongoing guidance and assistance from paraprofessionals or other school staff (Carter, Cushing, & Kennedy, 2009). Educators invite peers from the same classroom to serve as an ongoing support and then provide a brief orientation to students' roles and responsibilities within these arrangements. For example, peers might support students' learning and class participation by working together on collaborative projects, sharing materials, encouraging participation, reviewing work, offering feedback, and highlighting key concepts. Similarly, peers might support communication goals and social connections by initiating conversations, encouraging communication device use, making introductions to other classmates, and modeling appropriate social skills.

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As students sit next to and work with one another, paraprofessionals or educators model relevant support strategies, offer frequent encouragement, and monitor students' progress to ensure they are benefiting fully from the experience. As students gain more confidence working with one another, paraprofessionals strive to fade their direct support and serve as a resource to all students in the classroom. These approaches provide students with and without disabilities daily opportunities to work alongside and get to know one another *within* the classroom context.

Peer Network Strategies

Peer networks are individualized interventions emphasizing social connections beyond the classroom and throughout the school day. These strategies involve establishing a cohesive social group for a student with developmental disabilities that meets formally and informally across an entire semester or school year (Haring & Breen, 1992). Educators first discuss the network with the focus student (and other transition team members, including the family) to decide upon its focus and format, as well as to consider which peers should be invited to participate. A small group of three to six peers—usually schoolmates who have interests or experiences in common with the focus student—is invited to an initial organizational and orientation meeting. At first, an adult facilitator (e.g., special educator, school counselor, youth worker) leads the weekly network meetings. During these gatherings, participating students might participate in a shared activity (e.g., eating lunch, playing a game), discuss times to connect with one another socially throughout the week (e.g., between classes, before/after school, during breaks or lunch), and brainstorm ideas for involving the focus student with a disability more fully in the life of the school. Over time, the facilitator fades his or her involvement and peers take the lead in organizing and running network meetings. By making this introduction into an existing network of peers, the student with a disability may be more likely to develop friendships that extend beyond the school day.

Peer Partner Programs

Many secondary schools have established formal initiatives aimed at promoting the social and school participation of students with developmental disabilities. Indeed, as many as 40% of secondary schools nationally report offering some form of peer-mediated support program (e.g., peer buddy programs, peer tutoring, peer mentoring, Best Buddies). Such broad-based programs provide opportunities for larger numbers of peers within a high school

to get involved and may contribute to a more welcoming school culture overall. The process and procedures for these types of programs varies widely, in contrast to peer network and peer support arrangements.

Although school-wide peer partner programs can be configured in multiple ways, planning teams will have to navigate a number of common issues including (a) how best to generate interest and support from administrators and other school staff, (b) desired approaches for recruiting and selecting peers, (c) effective strategies for training students on their roles and responsibilities, (d) methods for supporting students as they interact and work with one another, and (e) strategies for sustaining and expanding the program (Hughes & Carter, 2008). Schools seem to have greater success and longevity when the group has a combined focus of fostering friendships among students, advocacy and awareness, and fun activities.

BENEFITS FOR STUDENTS WITH AND WITHOUT DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

Students with developmental disabilities certainly have much to gain from their interactions and friendships with their peers without disabilities. Research suggests such relationships provide an opportune context for students to develop a range of social, communication, academic, and functional skills; become more involved in school and community life; expand their social networks; and, perhaps most of all, develop lasting friendships (Carter & Kennedy, 2006; Carter et al., 2010). However, the benefits associated with these interventions appear to be far more reciprocal. Adolescents without disabilities who have had the opportunity to get to know their classmates within the context of such interventions speak powerfully about the personal impact of these new relationships. For example, peers have reported gaining (a) greater appreciation of individual strengths and diversity, (b) deeper commitments to the importance of inclusion and social justice, (c) improved understanding of and attitudes toward disability, (d) enhanced self-esteem, and (e) stronger advocacy and support skills (Carter et al., 2011; Copeland et al., 2004). But it is the friendships emerging from these encounters that may be most compelling. As future civic, corporate, congregational, and community leaders, the opportunities youth without disabilities have to develop such relationships during secondary and postsecondary school can have a long-term impact

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on the opportunities and attitudes people with developmental disabilities encounter as they transition to adulthood.

CONCLUSION

Friendships are an important element of adolescence for youth with and without disabilities. Being known, connected, and involved in school and community life can contribute to a host of positive outcomes and improved quality of life for students with and without disabilities. By expanding students' shared activities in schools, adequately equipping peers and youth, and engaging adults as facilitators versus exclusive supports, meaningful relationships can be fostered among youth with and without disabilities. Widespread implementation through evidence-based interventions of peer-mediated supports offer a viable pathway to an outcome that matters most: friendships. ✑

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