



Positive Steps for Social Inclusion

For students with and without disabilities, the social experience at school is as important as the academic experience. Both are necessary to ensure post-school success. Colleges and employers want to see strong interpersonal skills in addition to the other qualifications they may be seeking. Below, you will find a list of action steps to help parents facilitate social inclusion for their children with disabilities. This list contains many suggestions that may seem obvious to you, but you would be surprised how often they are overlooked.

Social inclusion is a critical issue for all students with disabilities whether the student is educated entirely in special education classes or is fully or partially included in regular education classes. Hopefully, all of these students will eventually live and work in the community where they need to be able to interact with people of all ability levels. The following action steps will help these students develop friendships with their non-disabled peers in the classroom, if applicable, or in other school or extracurricular activities.

One of the critical components of social inclusion is that the other students see your child, and your child sees him or herself, as a full participant in the classroom and the school. Every activity or assignment your child participates in will underscore this point, even if it is modified or adapted. Before long, your child and his or her classmates will see each other in terms of similarities rather than differences and measure success based on how far each of them has progressed rather than on a comparison with each other's achievements. This creates a positive learning environment for everyone.

1. If you believe it is appropriate for your child to be educated to any extent in regular education classes, it is important to start inclusion as early as possible.
2. If your child may benefit from being held back a year, start him/her in kindergarten a year late. You don't want to hold your child back later, after friendships have been formed with classmates.
3. The teacher (and paraeducator if applicable) should receive training or at least be aware of the importance of facilitating friendships. The best way to do this is to put a social goal on the IEP and specifically request staff training.

4. In the younger grades, talk to your child's class (and all the classes that will be at lunch or recess with your child) if there are obvious modifications/ adaptations required for your child's assignments, if your child requires any special equipment or if your child has significant communication issues. Explain Down syndrome and its effect on your child in very simple terms. Explain the need for adaptations and/or equipment as being the same as a person needing glasses or, braces. Then spend time talking about all the ways your child is just like them: loves pizza, movies, sports etc. You only need to do this for a couple of years. After that, the other students who have been in the same class with your child will start sharing this information with new students. *Everyone Counts: Teaching Acceptance & Inclusion*, the new NDSS disability awareness curriculum for grades K-6, is an excellent resource for lesson plans, activities and discussions. For more information, contact NDSS at (800) 221-4602 or info@ndss.org.
5. Consider sending a letter to parents of your child's classmates that provides the information you shared with the students. Communicate your willingness to answer any questions they may have about this information and about inclusion. This may also help when it comes to arranging activities with classmates outside of school.
6. Ensure that a few of your child's friends or supportive acquaintances are in his/her class every year. This is especially important during transition years to middle school and high school. The students who know and are supportive of your child will model positive relationships and promote the expectation that your child will continue to be an important part of the group. The fact that your child's friends may be in "gifted" or higher level classes in middle and high school should not be an obstacle. Many of these classes have a greater focus on group discussions than the regular classes and may be the best classes in which to promote your child's communication goals. Modified materials for these classes can be found as easily as for the regular classes.
7. Ensure that your child is a full participant in all class and school activities.
 - No matter how challenging the task, there is always a part that your child can do. The teacher should be looking for the objective in the assignment that is most meaningful for your child and adapt the assignment and materials accordingly. Example: groups of students are playing a math game based on prime numbers—the adapted assignment is for your child to keep score using a calculator.
 - Your child should always partner with the students for group activities. The aide or teacher can help but they shouldn't be your child's partner.
 - Your child should participate in any homework or projects that will be presented to the class or hung up on the walls. If the workload needs to be reduced, cut out homework and assignments that are not shared with the class. Any work on below grade level skills should be done when students are working independently at their desks rather than during a group activity.

- Paraeducators (aides) should be seen as helpers for all the students, not just your child. They should play as small a role as possible at lunch, recess, PE, art and music. Class work should be adapted to let your child work as independently as possible.
- To the extent possible, your child should participate in after school and weekend activities like carnivals, math night, plays, concerts, dances, clubs and sports events.
- As the students get older the friends will naturally provide support at these events for your child instead of having an adult present, or the adult can observe from a distance. Remember how you felt when your parents hovered around. This is difficult because it can involve taking some risks. It is important to ensure that your child receives as much information as possible about risky behaviors. The school health classes do a good job at starting this dialogue.
- If your child likes sports but cannot participate on a school team, he or she can be a manager. It is easier to make friends in small cohesive groups like teams and clubs than in the classroom.
- Explore volunteer opportunities that are available to students at school, like putting up decorations or collecting canned goods.

8. Out of school activities

- Consider having your child join scouts and community sports teams to provide additional opportunities to meet with classmates outside of school. Involvement in youth groups and religious education classes sponsored by your place of worship also achieves this goal and provides social inclusion in your religious community.
- Arrange community service opportunities with other classmates.
- Provide one-one time with a variety of classmates outside of school. Initially, you may need to be proactive and initiate these get-togethers. This is not necessarily an issue with the other students' interest in your child. Often it is their parents who are uncomfortable because they have exaggerated ideas about your child's needs. Inviting the other parent along can help with this issue.

9. If friendships are still not developing you can explore school activities that facilitate friendships such as a peer-mentoring program. One example of this type of program is "Circle of Friends." For a fact sheet on "Circle of Friends" see <http://www.unr.edu/educ/ndsip/factsheets/circle.friends.pdf>. Another excellent resource is the "Promoting Social Success" curriculum available from Brookes Publishing (<http://www.brookespublishing.com/store/books/siperstein-6741/index.htm>).