

During an IEP meeting almost 30 years ago, I asked Joey's mother what goals she had for her son in the coming year. As Joey's teacher, I was thinking about career exploration and post-high school training. Mrs. Ryan said, "I just want him to be happy and have some friends." Joey, like too many students with disabilities or differences did not have friends to spend time with and enjoy life. Joey's mother is not alone. Many parents of children with disabilities or differences have similar fundamental goals for their children. They want their children to be accepted, have loyal and lasting friendships, not rejected or ignored by their peers.

Educators are well aware of the fact that students with disabilities and/or differences are more likely to experience difficulties making, keeping, and being friends and that peer relationships affect academic achievement and school success. Ever since my meeting with Mrs. Ryan, I have considered that teachers are in a perfect position to help students make and be friends. Teachers quickly note which students have friends and which do not. They observe students' successful and not-so-successful attempts at making friends. Teachers can identify the qualities students seek out in friends and the qualities that are rejected. Unlike families, classrooms consist of a large number of potential friends. As Joey's teacher, I could identify potential friendships and take steps to encourage friendship development.

In order to make friends, children and youth must have the necessary knowledge, skills, and repeated opportunities to interact with potential friends in various situations and activities. Friendships develop when children experience the anticipation and fun of being together. Educators can make it easier for students to make friends, keep friends, and be friends by designing instructional activities that assist students in answering the question, what is friendship?

What is Friendship?

Teachers can deliver instruction that provides students with basic information about friendship. Topics can include various definitions, reasons why people have friends, different types of friendships, cultural differences related to friendships and changes in friendship over time. The explanation of friendship can then be expanded through instructional activities addressing what friendship looks like, sounds like, and feels like.

Friendship is what puts a sparkle in my child's eye and a bounce in her step.

What Friendship Looks Like

Friendship looks like the actions and reactions of friends and friendly people. In my opinion, television, newspapers, the Internet, and other media spend much more time depicting friendship-destroying behavior than friendship-fostering behavior. There are several resources available to educators designed to teach friendship behavior to students. One example is *A good friend: How to make one, how to be one* (Herron & Peter, 1998), a book written for middle to high school age students. Students are provided with a clear picture of what friendship looks like through the *Ten Rules of Friendship*

1. Do things together.
2. Be honest.
3. Talk about ideas, hopes, dreams, fears, and disappointments.
4. Encourage one another to do what's right.
5. Be trustworthy and trusting.
6. Talk about problems and disagreements.
7. Look out for one another.
8. Listen carefully to one another.
9. Comfort each other in down times.
10. Have fun!

Teachers can create opportunities for students to actually see what friendship looks like in videos, movies, social situations, and role-playing activities. Educators need to provide instruction to enable students to not only describe what friendship looks like but to perform these behaviors independently and effectively with others. Such instruction would require that students be provided with relevant role play activities; repeated opportunities for practice, corrective feedback to improve performance, and activities that require the use of newly learned behaviors in natural settings.



What Friendship Sounds Like

Friendship sounds like the verbal exchanges between two or more people who enjoy one another. Students can be assigned to observe and interview others to identify friendly words, expressions, and conversations. Instruction should also include the importance of body language, facial expression, and tones of voice as students are taught that it's not only what you say, it's also how you say it. Teachers and students can be on the look out for friendly language used by others in the classroom and then work together to develop a list similar to the following, *Most Important Words in Friendship*.

Six words -	I admit I made a mistake.
Five words -	You did a good job.
Four words -	What do you think?
Three words -	Can I help?
Two words -	Thank you.
One word -	We.

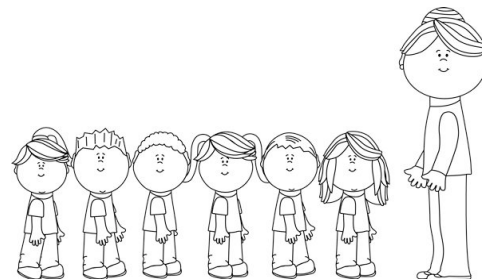
Friendship also sounds like friendly voices singing together. *I will be your friend: Songs and activities for young peacemakers* (Long, 2003, Teaching Tolerance) includes a CD of 26 songs and a book of the music, lyrics, and activities. This resource will enable educators to incorporate a wide range of culturally and musically diverse songs into friendship development and engage students motivated by music.

What Friendship Feels Like

Before students can describe what friendship feels like they must be given several opportunities to make friends, be friends, and try out friendly behaviors and language. Educators should design activities in which students can talk, play, share, and joke with one another in structured and unstructured settings to encourage students to practice friendship skills and experience friendship with several different classmates. This will not only enable students to share what friendship feels like but also create a set of shared experiences for all the students in the class.

Educators often begin the school year with several getting acquainted activities, such as *Find someone who*. In this activity students are asked to answer a set of 10 to 20 questions about themselves. For example what is your favorite movie, who is your hero, or what can you teach to someone else? Each week the teacher anonymously posts student answers to one question. All students try to match the responses to their classmates. This activity helps all the students learn about one another, discovering similarities and differences. Continuing such activities each week throughout the school year demonstrates to students that friends can always learn new things about one another. It also builds relationships as students discover more similarities between themselves and their classmates.

Students can also experience what friendship feels like by being a member of a classroom community. Teachers can work with their class to develop a community atmosphere, identifying a class name, song, motto, logo, handshake, etc. Students will develop a feeling of belonging and unity as class members work cooperatively to attain shared learning goals in a community of friends.



Friendship is when . . .

As students become involved in these activities they will begin to develop their own definitions of friendship as did one group of fourth graders who developed a friendship webpage.

According to these children, friendship is when you

- Treat your friends the way you want to be treated;
- Keep secrets that are told to you;
- Pay attention when your friend is talking;
- Keep your promises;
- Share things with your friend;
- Tell your friend the truth;
- Stick up for your friend; and
- Take turns.

Friendship in the Classroom

As teachers implement these and other strategies to foster friendship among their students, they will be looking for signs that the classroom has become a group of friends, their students demonstrate friendly behavior toward several classmates, and students who were not friends a month ago, are friends now. Friendship in the classroom looks like students who

- Help one another
- Smile, laugh, and share
- Sit next to and walk with each other
- Work and play together
- Enjoy being part of the group
- Point out similarities and connections between themselves and others
- Value the contributions of all classmates
- Notice when someone is left out and actively include them

Helping students develop friendship skills can be a yearlong adventure. Teachers can adopt a monthly focus on friendship as suggested in this table. The ability to make and keep good friends is an important lifelong skill. Teachers are in a perfect position to help their students become good friends.

Monthly Focus on Friendship Skills

January - *New Friends in the New Year*

- How to make a new friend.

February - *Why We Give Valentines?*

- How to let someone know you like being their friend.

March - *March Up and Help*

- Noticing that someone needs help, offering help, and helping skills.

April - *Stormy Weather*

- Dealing with disagreements and disappointments in friendship.

May - *Growing Friendship*

- How to be a good friend.

June - *Wish You Were Here*

- Sending postcards or messages when you miss a friend or are thinking about them.

July - *Friends after Fireworks*

- Skills needed to admit and accept mistakes, ask for and accept apologies, and remain friends after a fight.

August - *You Are My Sunshine*

- Learning about the messages in songs about friends.

September - *Welcome to a New Class of Friends*

- How to welcome a new student to your class.

October - *Tricks and Treats of Friendship*

- Skills in seeing the difficulties and rewards of being friends.

November - *Giving Thanks*

- The importance of and ways to say thank you to friends and for their friendship.

December - *The Gift of Friendship*

- Learning that friendship is a gift, given and received.

References and Resources

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Teaching Tolerance Home Page, www.teachingtolerance.org

As always, my intent in presenting these activities is to help teachers answer this question -

What can I do to make it easier for my students to learn and behave?



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