



TIPS FOR BEING A FRIEND WITH A STUDENT WITH AUTISM

(adapted from an article in Asperger's Digest, July-August 2000 issue)

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Principles that Promote Friendships

A lifetime of understanding starts in school. It is important for children to be exposed to and taught how to treat a classmate with autism at an early age. Children enjoy being helpful. Understanding a peer with autism promotes "a sense of ownership, where children view their classmate with autism as one of their own." It is up to teachers and parents to teach children how to interact with an autistic classmate.

Acknowledge weaknesses and recognize strengths.

Everyone has strengths and shortcomings. When children understand one another they have the power to help balance the child's deficiencies.

Don't underestimate the power and commitment of a child who is invited to learn.

Many children are more than willing to befriend a child with autism. The important thing is that they need to be "invited" to do so. By doing so, we open up an avenue to provide guidance, explanations and ideas about how to be a friend.

We teach best by our own example.

Everyday examples of compassion, humor and creative problem-solving will help young people learn how to interact with an autistic child. The following tips on how to be a friend to a classmate with autism were compiled by a fifth grade class at Horrace Mann Charter School in Hyannis, MA.

- Treat them like anyone else and talk to them like you would talk to another one of your friends. Don't be too formal and don't talk to them like they're a little kid.
- Don't tease kids with autism. Sometimes they don't understand the teasing or sometimes they think that you're being friendly when you're really not. If other kids tease them, pull the other kid aside and tell him to stop.
- Be helpful, but don't be too helpful. If you're too helpful, it might make the child with autism feel more different. Let him try to do it first by himself, then help out if he needs it. Include them in group activities like games and team sports if they can. Ask them to do things with you, but don't just explain it to them. Show them what to do so they can imitate you.
- Explain to other kids that weird behavior isn't the child with autism's new stuff.
- If they have a special ability or interest, try to find ways to let them use it. That way other people will think of them as smart.
- Say something to them when they do good things. You can cheer, give high-fives or just tell them "great work". They like to be complimented too!
- It's okay to get frustrated with them sometimes or want to play alone or with somebody else sometimes. We want to do that with our other friends too.



- Don't be afraid to ask them to do something. They are neat kids and can do a lot of things.
- Find something to like, a special skill to admire or a special interest they have. Some kids with autism are great with Mad Minutes in math or they are great at spelling or computers or they have a great memory for the class schedule. If you can find that special thing, then you have something to admire about them.
- His behavior is often his way of communication. He might tantrum because he's confused or do things over-and-over again because he is bored. He might push somebody to try to get his or her attention. Whatever it is, try to figure out what he's trying to say with his behavior.

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