

Introduction

There are two things that we have not yet covered. They are fairly basic things that affect your life everyday. But they are also extremely powerful. I'm talking about faith and friendships. Imagine what your life would be like without them. Instead of talking to you about that, I am going to rely on the poetry of one remarkable young lady to do the talking. You'll find excerpts from one of her poems below.

Access Your Heart

Please include us.
It hurts to be excluded.
A quick hi and a hug are not enough.
We need real inclusion.
When will you understand?

We are all in need of a church which welcomes and
accepts us for who we are.
We are made in God's image.
When you forget to include us you are forgetting to
include God.

Access is more than ramps and accessible
bathrooms.
The hearts of everyone need to be open and
welcoming.

Open your heart.
And let us in.

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As Sarah so eloquently states, everybody needs to be loved and included. Take a moment to think about your friendships, and about the church or youth groups of which you are a part (if any). Have you inadvertently been excluding people with disabilities from these areas of your life? It may not even be something of which you are conscious, but something as small, but significant, as passing someone by without saying hello, or offering a sincere smile.

As we go through this module we will look at both faith and friendships and the importance of both in the lives of people who have disabilities. Please understand as we continue that none of the text, activities, or documents you see are based on any certain religion. The purpose here is to talk about faith in general, and not to promote any particular religion or spiritual beliefs.

The Importance of Spirituality for People with Disabilities

Having faith is a staple in many of our lives. Whatever religion that faith is rooted in, is not important for our purposes here. We apply our faith everyday as we deal with life's curveballs. Whether it be something as minor as trying to pull ourselves out of a bad mood, or as significant as coping with a death, our faith is that underlying strength that we pull from to get through. Take a moment and think about the church or synagogue or mosque that you attend, if any, and/or any youth groups in which you are involved. Do you see a lot of people with disabilities in these areas of your life? If you answered yes—good! But if the answer was no, think about why that is. It's not that people your age who have disabilities don't have faith or don't desire to be involved in church and youth group activities. It may be that their participation is being denied. This could be the result of several factors.

First of all, how accessible are churches? Because of the separation of church and state, churches are exempt from the laws and codes requiring accessibility that public buildings must adhere to. Unfortunately, what this means is that an *un*-accessible church is perfectly okay—legally speaking anyway. So it may be the case that many persons with disabilities are not able to attend the church of their choice due to the architectural barriers that the church imposes. If youth groups tend to meet in the church, then those organizations would also be a problem for a person with disabilities in terms of simply getting there.

Of course, architectural barriers only affect persons with certain physical disabilities. But what about people who have mental retardation, or Down syndrome? What kinds of barriers might these individuals face? Like in other areas of society, the

answer is attitudinal barriers. Due to a lack of knowledge and understanding about disability issues, some people may not feel comfortable having people with disabilities involved in their church. They may fear that such a person will be a disruption, or cause a scene. Sadly, one person's fear can result in another person's exclusion.

As a peer tutor, you are in a unique position to understand how becoming educated and getting to know individuals with disabilities can change your beliefs and attitudes. Before becoming a peer tutor, you may or may not have had certain fears, or believed in certain stereotypes. After becoming a peer tutor, however, your perspective may have changed in these areas. This puts you in a prime position to advocate for your friends with disabilities. So the next time you are attending a spiritual service, or a youth group function, try to note how a person with disabilities would be received in this domain. If you feel that it would be a negative reception, think about ways in which you can advocate for the participation of individuals with disabilities in this area of your life. Simply letting people get to know your friends with disabilities may be all it takes for them to realize they are just like everybody else and that their fears are unfounded.

In an effort to remove attitudinal barriers, here is a list of questions that may help you reflect on the attitudes of your congregation or youth group towards people with disabilities:

- Are persons with disabilities welcome to worship with us?
- Are there people with visible or invisible disabilities who are currently members?
- Are we encouraging more persons with disabilities in our community to consider joining our church?
- Do we recognize the gifts of people with disabilities and are they involved in the full life of the church?

- Are people with disabilities given opportunities to serve others within the congregation and in outreach programs?
- Are positions of leadership offered to individuals who happen to have a disability?

Understanding the attitudes of the people with whom you worship is the first step to providing support and adaptations to people with disabilities.

ACTIVITY

Look at the 6 questions listed above. In thinking about your own faith congregation (or youth group), answer those questions. If you do not attend a faith congregation or youth group, find a friend or family member who does and ask them these questions in relation to their faith congregation. Once you have written down your answers, think about ways in which you could help people with disabilities become more involved in the faith organization on which you focused. Would this involve removing architectural barriers? Would it mean eradicating attitudinal barriers that are imposed by members of the congregation? What needs to be done and what are some ways in which you could achieve this goal?

The Importance and Meaning of Friendships

Your friends are probably one of the most important things in your life. You're there for each other, you have fun together, and occasionally you get in trouble together. What would you do without your friends? Life would be boring! You are at a point in your life where friendships are more important than ever. You're growing up, getting to know who you are and what you like and don't like. There are things on your mind and things going on in your life that you need to talk about but that discussing with your parents is just not cool. Your friends are the ones in which you confide. And they confide in you as well. Now, more than ever, you lean on your friends. Imagine going it alone through all the trials and tribulations of dating, college scouting, job hunting, disagreements with your parents and siblings, and what to wear to so and so's party. In fact, if you didn't have friends, you likely wouldn't even be going to so and so's party in the first place.

Well let's imagine for a minute that you have a disability. If you suddenly acquired a disability do you think your closest friends would stop being your friends? Probably not. They love you and would likely stick by you. Now think about being born with a disability. How does this change things? Do you think those same friends would still be your friends? Maybe they would. But often, people shy away from befriending someone who has a disability. And making friends would have been even more difficult if you were being educated in a classroom that was separate from the rest of the kids in your school. That's already two strikes against you in the friend making department, just

because you have a disability! How would this make you feel? Probably a little sad, but most of all lonely. You know how important your friends are to you and how much you value those friendships. Well, having meaningful friendships is equally important for people with disabilities. Just because a person has a disability does not mean that they don't go through the same experiences, emotions, and adjustments that you do in life. And having a disability in no way diminishes the need to have strong, meaningful friendships to depend upon through life's joys and sorrows.

Take a minute to think about your own life and don't be afraid to be honest with yourself. Have you, either consciously or unconsciously, avoided being friends with a person who had a disability because you didn't think you would have anything in common? Or that you couldn't do the same things and have as much fun with that person as you could with your other friends? It is okay if you answered yes, as societal attitudes have likely taught you that people with disabilities are "different" and therefore you automatically gravitated towards people without disabilities, who were more like yourself, for friendships.

But by being a peer tutor you are learning that this is a myth! People with disabilities might have different learning styles, and different needs, but they are regular people just like you! And all people, regardless of their learning styles and other needs, need friends.

As you go through your peer tutoring class, start to notice the similarities between yourself and the students you are tutoring, instead of the differences. Instead of viewing yourself as someone who is there solely to help another student, view the students you are tutoring as peers with whom you may find you have a lot in common and possibly

develop a close friendship. You certainly don't have to like everybody and be everybody's friend! But try to open your mind and really get to know the students with whom you are working and at least see the opportunity for new friendships within those relationships. By *assuming* that your peers with disabilities are so different from you that you will not have anything in common, you create the very barriers we should all be working to break down.

ACTIVITY

Do people with disabilities have the same opportunities to make friends as students without disabilities? Do students with disabilities have friendships more often with typical peers or with others with disabilities? Do you think having a true friendship with a typical peer would be important for a student with a disability? Why or why not?

Reflect on these questions and explain your answers.

Strategies for Helping People with Disabilities Develop Friendships

One thing that all people have in common is the desire for love and acceptance. Some people enjoy having many friendships with many different people, and others only like to develop very close friendships with one or two people. Regardless, the bottom line is this: we all need friendships. Unfortunately, what often happens to people with disabilities is that they can frequently be overlooked by their peers when it comes to making friends. It isn't infrequent for people with disabilities to be isolated and have very few people in their lives besides family and caregivers. Isolation and rejection can make a person feel lonely and overlooked, even in the midst of a group.

One way in which meaningful connections can be established between a person with disabilities and his or her peers is through a *Circle of Friends*. This is a small gathering of individuals who develop a relationship with a person who has a disability in an effort to create an encouraging and respectful friendship with him or her. The goal is not to view the person's disability as a problem that needs to be fixed, but to encourage that person's hopes and dreams. With a Circle of Friends, the focus remains positive and encouraging. The goal of a Circle of Friends is to make a person feel valued and loved - something we all need.

A Circle is completely informal, typically meeting once a month or so. The location should be comfortable, casual, and convenient. Those who are part of the Circle listen to what the focus person has to say about their dreams and desires in life. From there, the members of the Circle figure out how to go about helping the individual

achieve those goals. Although a Circle of Friends is designed to benefit a person with disabilities, it is usually common for everybody involved to feel that their lives have been enriched through the experience. It is a chance not only for the person with disabilities, but everybody to meet new people and make new friends!

Another strategy for helping a person with disabilities develop meaningful friendships is by using the MAPs (Making Action Plans) process. This is a tool that will help students become more connected with the people in their lives, such as peers, co-workers, and members of their faith congregation. Like the Circle of Friends, MAPs begins with a meeting in which information about a particular person is collected. MAPs is a strategic problem solving/planning process that involves the focus person, his or her friends, family members, therapists, etc. Key questions are addressed and answered in order to determine the best course of action for helping the focus person reach his or her goals. For a detailed overview of the MAPs process and for information on the key questions addressed, please refer to the instructional unit titled *Person Centered Planning and Life Outcomes*.

Another simple strategy that you probably use everyday without even knowing it is modeling. By modeling appropriate social behaviors and acceptable social practices while working with your peer buddy, you are teaching him or her valuable lessons in how to act in socially acceptable ways. You can do this both at school, and outside of school. A wonderful opportunity to model appropriate social behavior is through accompanying your peer buddy to social events, such as football games, basketball games, movies, shopping, out to eat, etc. By seeing how you act in these situations, your friend also learns how to act in those environments.

As a peer tutor, another way in which you can help a student with disabilities make friends is to truly get to know the person with whom you are trying to help develop connections. Some questions to ask yourself are:

- Do I *really* know this person?
- Do I know what it is he or she really enjoys doing?
- Do I know what makes a great day for him or her?
- Do I know what makes him or her have a bad day?

By answering these simple questions, you can better determine how and where you might be able to find like-minded people for your peer buddy to meet and potentially develop friendships.

By becoming more aware of how to help a person with disabilities break down the social and attitudinal barriers that may exist for him or her, you are taking a great stride in helping that person develop meaningful and lasting friendships. And by doing this, you are also promoting disability awareness. Always a good thing!

ACTIVITY

With a particular student with disabilities in mind, think about ways in which you personally could help that person develop some meaningful friendships. What would be the best strategy, or strategies, to use with the person you have in mind? You don't have to stick to the strategies listed above; feel free to come up with your own ideas and suggestions.

References:

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- Strully, J. (1997). Developing and facilitating friendships. *Tuesday's Child Magazine*, *September/October*, 8-9.