
Friendship Development in Elementary School Aged Children with Disabilities

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Purpose

- To better understand friendships of children with disabilities in elementary school.
- To gain insight into best practice strategies in Connecticut for helping children and adolescents with disabilities make and keep friends.

Background

- Friendships enhance social skills and quality of life
- Many children develop their first friendships and learn to navigate the social world in a school setting
- Supplemental social activities can expand the scope of a student's social world beyond the classroom
- Quantity and nature of additional friendships depend on the child's access to opportunities which are often arranged by family members

Importance

- Comparing familial experiences and corresponding social outcomes of students in segregated and inclusive settings provides insight into best-practice strategies for enhancing social connectedness
 - This study will provide increased understanding concerning the provision of recommendations for fostering more advanced social skills
 - The insight gained and practices implemented will result in more positive friendships and social experiences for children with disabilities
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Methodology

- Informational email to 1696 people (school principals and Connecticut Down Syndrome Congress mailing list)
- Recruitment flyer was also distributed at various conferences
- Eligibility: Parents of students with disabilities in grades K - 6 in the state of Connecticut
- 100 surveys completed online through June 19, 2007

Methodology

- Data were exported from the survey website to Excel and SPSS for analysis
- Data from 14 respondents were deleted for one of the following reasons:
 - 1) the child did not have a disability (n = 2)
 - 2) the child was in a grade higher than 6th (n = 3)
 - 3) the respondent answered fewer than 10% of the survey items (n = 9)
- After data cleaning the sample size was reduced to 86

Survey Questionnaire

- Self-administered online (paper copy was also available)
- Designed to gather information about experiences of children with disabilities in special education and general education classroom settings
- Questions were grouped into four sections, and all questions in each section were asked of everyone:
 - A) Disability Information
 - B) Friendships
 - C) Family Experiences
 - D) Background Information.

Parent Characteristics

Race/Ethnicity	Frequency	Percentage
White	71	96%
Latino/Hispanic	2	3%
Asian	1	1%

Marital status	Frequency	Percentage
Married	61	84%
Divorced/Separated	10	14%
Single	2	3%

Family Characteristics

Number of children	Frequency	Percentage
One	10	14%
Two	33	45%
Three	22	30%
More than 3	9	12%

All Children in Family	Frequency	Mean Age (years)
First	74	12
Second	64	10
Third	29	7
Fourth	7	9

Child Characteristics

Gender of Child	Frequency	Percentage
Male	60	70%
Female	26	30%

Disability Category	Frequency	Percentage
Autism	26	30%
Multiple Disabilities	23	27%
Other Health Impairment	14	16%
Intellectual Disability	11	13%
Learning Disability	5	6%
Speech or Language Impairment	4	5%
Orthopedic Impairment	2	2%
Traumatic Brain Injury	1	1%

Child Characteristics

Grade	Frequency	Percentage
Kindergarten	9	11%
1 st grade	10	12%
2 nd grade	16	19%
3 rd grade	10	12%
4 th grade	17	20%
5 th grade	13	15%
6 th grade	10	12%
Other	1	1%

Classroom setting	Frequency	Percentage
Special Education	48	56%
General Education	38	44%

Child's Friendships

Does child have any friends	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	67	78%
No	19	22%

Does child have a best friend	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	40	66%
No	9	15%
I Don't Know	12	20%

Number of Friends with and without Disabilities

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Friends in school	5.56	4.25
Friends in school with a disability	4.38	4.16
Friends in school without a disability	1.78	2.40
Friends out of school	1.63	2.27
Friends out of school with a disability	1.43	1.70
Friends out of school without disability	0.43	0.73

IEP Goals (1)

Children with a goal on their IEP that addresses social skills in school have significantly more friends with disabilities in school ($t(39)=2.79, p=.008$).

	Goal on IEP that addresses social skills in school	Mean	SD	t	Df	p-value
Number of friends with disabilities a child has in school	Yes	1.65	1.78			
	No	.54	.97	2.79	39	.008*

* $p < .05$

IEP Goals (2)

If the child has a goal on their IEP that address making, keeping and playing with friends the child starts fights, says mean things or teases others significantly less than children who do not have a goal on their IEP ($t(41)=-2.70, p=.010$)

	IEP Goal that addresses making, keeping and playing with friends	Mean	SD	t	Df	p-value
Child Starts fights or says mean things to others	Yes	1.29	.67			
	No	1.89	1.01	-2.70	41	.010*

* $p<.05$

Extra Curricular Activities

Does child participate in school-sponsored or extra curricular activities	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	26	35%
No	43	58%
Sometimes	5	7%

Does child have friends in school-sponsored or extra curricular activities	Frequency	Percentage
No, none	36	53%
A few	24	35.0%
Yes, a lot	8	12%

Play Dates (1)

Family sets up play dates for child with other family members	Frequency	Percentage
Never	38	51%
Sometimes	23	31%
Often	7	10%
All the time	6	8%

Family sets up play dates for child with children in the neighborhood	Frequency	Percentage
Never	36	49%
Sometimes	28	38%
Often	5	7%
All the time	4	6%

Play Dates (2)

Family sets up play dates for child with children from school	Frequency	Percentage
Never	21	28%
Sometimes	44	60%
Often	6	8%
All the time	3	4%

Family sets up play dates for child with children of family friends	Frequency	Percentage
Never	29	39%
Sometimes	35	47%
Often	9	12%
All the time	1	1%

Family Encourages Friendships

Family encourages child to make friends with children who have disabilities	Frequency	Percentage
Never	7	10%
Sometimes	23	33%
Often	23	33%
All the time	17	24%

Family encourages child to make friends with non-disabled peers	Frequency	Percentage
Never	4	6%
Sometimes	19	26%
Often	26	36%
All the time	23	32%

Child Invited to a Friend's House

Child has been invited to the house of a non-disabled peer	Frequency	Percentage
Never	23	32%
Sometimes	36	50%
Often	7	10%
All the time	6	8%

Child has been invited to the house of a child who has a disability	Frequency	Percentage
Never	28	38%
Sometimes	38	51%
Often	5	7%
All the time	3	4%

Family Helps Make Friends

Family helps child make and keep friends	Frequency	Percentage
Never	6	8%
Sometimes	32	44%
Often	24	33%
All the time	11	15%

Birthday Parties

Friends invited to child's last birthday party	Mean
Total	9.49
Friends with disabilities	2.16
Friends without disabilities	8.15

Friends attending child's last birthday party	Mean
Total	7.72
Friends with disabilities	1.46
Friends without disabilities	7.26

Birthday parties child was invited to last year = 2.39

Birthday parties child attended last year = 2.24

Parental Aspirations & IEP (1)

If the child did not have a goal on their IEP that addressed making, keeping and playing with friends the parent wished their child had significantly more friends ($M=2.23, \sigma =1.34$), than children who do have a goal on their IEP ($M=1.50, \sigma =.97$) ($t(34)=-2.40, p=.022$).

	IEP Goal that addresses making, keeping and playing with friends	Mean	SD	t	Df	p-value
Parent wishes child had more friends	Yes	1.50	.97			
	No	2.23	1.34	-2.40	34	.022*

* $p < .05$

Parental Aspirations & IEP (2)

If the child does not have a goal on their IEP that addressed social skills outside of school the parent wishes their child had significantly more friends ($M=2.18, \sigma =1.27$) than children who do have a goal on their IEP ($M=1.00, \sigma = .71$) ($t(6)=-3.32, p=.015$)

	IEP Goal that addresses Social skills outside of school	Mean	SD	t	Df	p-value
Parent wishes child had more friends	Yes	1.00	.71			
	No	2.18	1.27	-3.32	6	.015*

Limitations

- Some principals did not have permission to disseminate information to parents
- Respondents were not required to answer any of the questions, which contributed to the relatively small sample size
- Due to the nature of recruitment and the manner in which the survey was administered, we were unable to calculate true response rate
- Only focused on children in grades K – 6

Summary & Implications

- There is a need to further investigate the differences between children in inclusive and non-inclusive classroom settings
- Findings will provide information on strategies for parents and professionals to assist children with disabilities to make, keep and play with friends
- Improving the ability of children and adolescents with disabilities to make, keep and play with friends—both in and outside of the classroom—will lead to an enhanced quality of life

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