

Social Inclusion Ideas & Tips for Parents

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1. Get involved

Volunteer at school, church, sports, dance, theater, Scouts, 4-H – whatever your child is involved in. This is a good way to meet other students and observe interactions. If you are able to volunteer at school, you can get a little insight into what goes on. You can also develop relationships with teachers (sometimes a teacher in a different classroom can clue you in), paraprofessionals, lunch room, workers and other parents. Then, find out from those folks who the people are who might be good friends outside of the classroom for your child. Volunteer to be a room parent, chaperone for dances, parties, and other activities such as field trips/field days. Then, step back and make sure you give your child space.

2. Peer presentations

I'm a fan of peer presentations. I believe education is a game changer. Some tips on peer presentations.

- A. School is not the only place needing a peer presentation. Church and other extracurricular activities may need it to.
- B. Peer presentations are for the adults too. Often parents call me or make a point of telling me how much they appreciate the educational handout. They say they learn something and it helps them to know how to answer their children's questions.
- C. Include some kind of handout. In fact, you may not be able to do a presentation for the dance class or soccer team, but you can draft a letter about your child and the Buddy Walk and send home with all the kids.
- D. Consider combining walk/event recruitment with the peer presentation.
- E. Consider including:
 - i. Hands on activities, PowerPoints Presentations, handouts like books marks (we give out Rachel's Razorback tattoos), candy (get permission), free registration, shirt from previous year.
 - ii. Read a book like "We'll Paint the Octopus Red"
 - iii. Show a video like "Just Like You – Down Syndrome"

3. Be pro-active

Down syndrome or not, I want to know my child's friends. Some things we have facilitated:

- A. Annual Christmas Cookie party. Started in kindergarten to get to know the students outside of school. Early elementary years she invited all girls in her class to the cookie party. Two hours during Christmas break. Everyone has fun. Then, we switched to allowing her to choose a combination of friends from school church, community, etc. Our newest tradition is an outing to a Christmas movie or play when school gets out.
- B. Theater is Rachel's love – *we go to a lot of plays*. It's fun to take a friend.
- C. Back to school High School Musical Party
- D. Birthday parties
- E. Sunday School Scavenger Hunt
- F. Movie, park, swimming, shopping outings
- G. Sports outings (professional, college, school, rec, etc.)

- H. Invite others to the Down syndrome walk and your child's activities like plays, dance, gymnastics, soccer, etc. This includes peers, teachers, leaders, coaches, church leaders, etc.
- I. Sleepovers. I have mixed emotions about sleepovers. Having a child with communication challenges makes me SUPER picky about this. Another reason I like having them in my house. Your family values will determine how you handle this. I prefer having the girls at my house!
- J. Church retreats, church activities and church camp
- K. Consider going to see friends at their activities like ball games, dance recitals, etc.

4. Be a risk taker

I wrote a blog about Rachel's first play. She was a magical baby doll in Pinocchio. My own fear almost prevented me from taking her to the tryouts. **My fears.** Is it legitimate or is it your fear? Will it harm your child or is it your own insecurities? I decided that day that I would never let my fears prevent Rachel from doing something. Invite friends to go and do things. Invite them to birthday parties. Keep inviting them or find a new friend to invite. Don't be afraid to accept invitations either. You can check and see what they will be doing and plan accordingly. Sometimes we as parents have to say no to an activity because it is not a good fit. *Remember to invite friends with Down syndrome, other special needs or maybe there is someone in your child's class who is often left out or seen as a little different by the other children.*
<http://www.thesassysouthernqal.com/auditions-paralyzed-by-fear-updated/>

5. Educate and Be Educated.

This goes back to that peer presentation thing but those who will be working with or will be around our children need to be educated. A few years ago at church camp our students were broken into small groups. Two of my friends were leading the group Rachel was in. It was 10 girls her age. It was a bit of an emotional time. One of my friends said that as the girl sitting by Rachel was sharing and visibly upset, Rachel began digging in her bag. The friend said at first she started to stop Rachel but she remembered our discussions about Rachel and decided to let it play out. It took her a minute but she found what she was looking for. She found her Kleenex and wiped Kylie's tears, patted her and handed her the tissue. My friend said that had she not learned from me she would have thought Rachel was just being distracting. She was glad she let it play out. I go to Sunday school teachers, choir directors, dance teachers, soccer coaches and anyone else who will be working with Rachel and offer up information. I try to do the same with her friend's families. Make sure people understand you have high expectations for behavior and participation. Educating the adults or leaders may well be the key to facilitating social interaction.

6. Types of Peers

- A. **Variety.** My personal belief is there is a need for a variety of peers. My belief in this reflects the values in our life. My husband and I have lots of different kinds of friends. I have older friends, friends who are a lot like me and friends who are very different. I believe Rachel's life should be the same. As noted in her presentation, she does a lot of different activities. This has also been one of the ways we have cultivated social inclusion. Rachel's freshman peer mentor at high school is a young lady we met when we first moved to Kansas City who is involved in Christian Youth Theater. She wanted to be Rachel's peer mentor and we wanted her so we made a request. The school honored

it. It has helped with the smooth transition. Unintended positive outcome from inclusion.

- B. **Older peers.** A good current example of older peers is high school. When Rachel went to high school, older peers reached out and really helped Rachel. It wasn't the other ninth graders. It was older students from church or those she has met in the community. The other freshmen were trying to figure it all out, too. I really see this at church where the older girls have a maternal instinct and are great mentors.
 - C. Rachel has peers **with and without disabilities.** I once heard a speaker say that you should ask your child who they want as friends. She wanted all her daughter's friends to be typical peers and none to have Down syndrome. Rachel has fun with her friends with Down syndrome and other disabilities and she has fun with typical kids, too. She has two friends in particular that are often invited to do things with us when we do group activities. It is encouraging seeing how Rachel's friends include and respond to her friends who also have special needs. One has started going to camp and other church events with us.
7. **Thick skin is a must for all parents.** When our children hurt, we hurt. Sometimes I am all worked up about something that Rachel doesn't even know about. Then, I have become very indignant and proclaim to my husband that I will never invite that child to do anything again. Often I realize that Rachel is the one who would be hurt. So I apply another layer of skin, suck it up and keep on keeping on. I also think it is important not to get pulled into drama. This is especially true with girls. Sometimes it is hard to know when or when not to intervene. Sometimes just like you do with kids without Down syndrome, you have to let things play out. I sometimes fish for information from other kids or parents but you have to be really careful with this. I don't want to plant negative ideas about others, but I do try to have a few people I feel I can trust to try to get info from. One result of building relationships in many settings and over time is that sometimes kids go to their parents who then contact me.
8. **Be reasonable.** All I can say here is that sometimes when I am thinking that a friend or peer should have done something differently, I stop and wonder what I would have done as a 14 or 16 year old? Sometimes my expectations of others are not very reasonable. And yes sometimes they are reasonable and another child's parents are the real source of frustration. What to do? I call a good friend who understands (usually someone not in my community) and whine and have a pity party for a bit. Then, I put on my big girl pants and keep on going. No good comes from stewing over something. It interferes with the ability to move forward.
9. **Nothing is perfect.** Your child's friendships may not look like your dream of what friendships should look like. Of course, most of our lives haven't looked like the fairytale in our heads. Every human being's relationships are different. At the end of the day, none of us gets to pick our children's friends, Down syndrome or not. My friend Missy says "In this way we really are more alike than different." We can guide the process but in large part it is out of our hands.
10. **A few good friends.** I believe the world of social media and connectedness we live in leads us to believe we are something less if we don't have a ton of friends. In reality a few friends who are loyal, loving, supportive and kind are much better than a long list.

The attached "Real Friends," a blog I wrote a few years ago. It is still in my top five most read blogs of all-time. It summarizes some of my thoughts on this friend thing. Friendships and relationships are hard for all of us. But good friends, real friends are worth the effort.