

Study finds that inclusive classrooms don't necessarily increase friendships for children with disabilities

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A curriculum that supports the development of friendships is key to the success of students with disabilities, according to new research by Lori Erbrederis Meyer, assistant professor of early childhood education. Credit: Sally McCay

Dropping off a child at kindergarten for the first time can be one of the most memorable yet terrifying experiences of parenthood. Among the many concerns parents face is the worry whether your child will make friends – a key factor, research shows, in reducing anxiety, depression

and the likelihood of being bullied.

For parents of children with [disabilities](#), the concern is even greater as four-out-of-10 of their children will enter kindergarten without the [social skills](#) necessary to develop close friendships. The response from schools has been to create inclusive classrooms, where a significant number of students with disabilities now receive the majority of their education and are believed to have a better chance at developing close relationships with peers.

But after studying six inclusive classrooms, Lori Erbrederis Meyer, assistant professor of early childhood and early childhood special education, has found that inclusive classrooms with disability awareness curricula alone do not increase friendships for students with disabilities. Her study, forthcoming in *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, also showed that having a best friend helps children with high rates of problem behaviors and low rates of social skills still gain peer acceptance.

"The fact that about 40 percent of young [children with disabilities](#) will enter kindergarten without age-appropriate social relationship skills is striking, because these skills help them form friendships, which in turn supports smoother transitions in kindergarten and may prevent later peer victimization," says Meyer, a former inclusive [early childhood](#) teacher herself. "We found that inclusion in and of itself does not equate to increased acceptance, classroom membership or peer relationships. This research emphasizes the importance of individualizing class-wide programs based on children's support needs."

Investigating the impact of a disability-focused curriculum

In her article, "Impact of an Affective Intervention on the Friendships of Kindergarteners with Disabilities," Meyer investigates a disability awareness curriculum's impact on the development of close friendships among 26 kindergarteners with disabilities enrolled in six inclusive classrooms. She also looked into whether the presence of at least one best friendship mediated the relationship between children's social skills/problem behaviors and peer acceptance.

The study compared the results of two groups, each containing students with and without disabilities. In one group, classroom teachers implemented the "Special Friends" program, a curriculum designed to increase children's positive attitudes about disabilities. In the other, teachers implemented a curriculum with a focus on science. Each program included class-wide shared book reading, mixed-ability cooperative learning groups where students engaged in play-based activities with one another, and a lending library, allowing children to bring books read at school home to read with their families.

The Special Friends program read books with a focus on disability-related themes, with teachers discussing the book's plot, connections between the children and the characters in the books, understanding of disabilities and disability-specific vocabulary. Teachers using the science program led shared book reading in a very similar way, except that they read books with science-related content.

"Contrary to our hypothesis that the number of best friendships would increase in the Special Friends program, we found a significant increase in the number of best friendships for children with disabilities participating in the science program," Meyer says.

There was, the study notes, one important difference between the cooperative learning groups' activities in Special Friends versus the science curriculum. While the former encouraged open-ended, dramatic

play—like pretending to run a restaurant —the latter worked on project-based activities that had clearly defined outcomes—like working together to build a bird's nest.

"Evidence shows that children in the Special Friends program may not have had the play skills necessary to engage in extended, independent play interactions during the cooperative learning group activities," Meyer says. "Some of the children weren't sure how to initiate interactions. This may account for the group's decline in the mean number of best friendships."

Other findings showed that self-regulation and social skills are directly related to having at least one best friend and acceptance among peers. "Children who had higher rates of problem behavior and lower social skills also had lower rates of peer acceptance," Meyer says. "However, when children with these social-behavioral characteristics had a best friendship, it did not result in lower peer acceptance scores."

Meyer says that to increase the chances of children with disabilities making friendships, high-quality inclusion models must be structured in a way that creates an environment that supports [young children's](#) acceptance, membership and the development of friendships.

"Our research shows that at the same time we're focusing on improving children's social skills and decreasing their challenging behaviors, we also have to be helping them make friends in the classroom because of the protective factors that it has and its effect on producing better social and academic outcomes." she says. "Within our early learning environments we need to think deeply about how we create opportunities for children to grow in both their academic and social skills. This is especially prevalent for [children](#) who may enter kindergarten with delays or disabilities that may impact their social-emotional development and impact their ability to develop close friendships with classmates."

More information: "Impact of an Affective Intervention on the Friendships of Kindergarteners With Disabilities." *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education* 0271121415571419, first published on March 6, 2015 [DOI: 10.1177/0271121415571419](https://doi.org/10.1177/0271121415571419)

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