

# Starting a Mentoring Club in your high school for Students with Disabilities



For various reasons, students with disabilities do not participate in after-school, recreational activities. They spend too much time alone, are isolated and aren't learning important peer interactions and social skills. When the effort to bring peers together evolves from within the school system, it fosters natural inclusion and mainstreaming. Participating "typical" students choose to be a part of the club and want to be there.

*Here's how you can help to start a mentoring club in your high school!*

## How to Begin

■ Meet with the school principal to share the idea and seek input – this is the first step in ensuring the success of the club.



■ The next step is to recruit a compassionate, popular and highly regarded teacher to serve as the faculty sponsor. When the students trust a beloved teacher, they are more apt to take a chance and try something different. (In most school systems, the teacher receives a stipend and club budget.) Adult volunteers, such as teaching assistants or reputable community members, should also be recruited for assistance in planning and as extra adult hands at events.

■ It may be helpful if the club can collaborate with a representative from the special education staff, in order to access more knowledge about various disabilities.

## Planning

■ In planning events, it is important for club members to think about age and ability-appropriate activities, and they need to become sensitive to the time table of this audience. Watching a scary movie at 7:00 pm may work for many "typical" teens, but not necessarily for this club.

*Perfect Pals was so much fun, I'm so glad I decided to get involved.*

— Sara, Student



## Events

- Planning social gatherings allows for natural relationships to develop, and it provides an environment for everyone to get to know each other.
- It is important to plan a variety of events because, like all youth, not everyone enjoys the same activities.
- Theme parties provide opportunities for music and dancing: a **Halloween Mixer**, making **Holiday Gingerbread Houses** or **Valentine Cards** are just a few ideas. **Arts & Crafts**, **Board and Computer Game Fun** and **Movie Nights** offer interactions with students at different development levels. An **Ice Cream Social** at a park when the weather is nice allows club members to separate into different activities, from the playground to an organized sport or game, along with enjoying the ice cream treats together. Events can also be held in a school cafeteria or gym, at the Boys & Girls Club or Teen Center.



## Training

- Scheduled training sessions are key to the success of the Club. One strategy is to invite Special Education staff members from each building level to meet with the club members, and/or have a parent of a special needs child or a particular student's teaching assistant help with the training.
- A training session might be piggy-backed with a Club event, so the trainers can conduct the workshop for club members and then role model at the event. Students should be advised about:
  - the privacy laws and confidentiality
  - importance of safety issues, i.e. precautions to take for wandering students or wheelchair bound students
  - appropriate manner of speaking (not using baby talk or inappropriate language)
  - demonstrating how to be a positive role model (helping an individual understand when a behavior is not acceptable, rather than laughing)
- Students should always be encouraged to ask questions and ask for help.

## Training, con't

■ Students should also be privately advised about specific cases and situations. Some specific challenges might include:

- things that may aggritate a student (certain noises, smells, lights)
- how to address a meltdown
- how to bring a resistant student into the group activity

## Key Ingredients

■ The universal ingredients for all youth are music and food, keeping in mind sensitivity to particular diets. Music can be soothing, and it can also provide lots of fun in teaching line dancing, leading congo lines or free form dancing and singing.



■ Keeping computers and board games on hand will help to make sure all students are engaged. One rule might be that students have to complete a project or board game activity before going onto the computer with a mentor.

## Finding the Comfort Level

■ Parents should always feel encouraged to participate with their younger children until they are comfortable leaving them alone at Club events. It's a great opportunity for some respite for the parent. If an older student with a disability is initially resistant to getting involved, he can be invited to mentor a younger student. He will feel needed and included, while simultaneously interacting with his peers.

## Evolving to the Next Step

■ Club members should be encouraged to independently sit together at lunch, assemblies or other school gatherings. Ultimately, the goal is for club members to schedule even more events and one-on-one activities together.

*My son looks forward to these get-togethers. He feels like he's "one of the gang."*

— Bob, Parent of Special Needs Child

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It's time to listen.

[www.AutismSpeaks.org](http://www.AutismSpeaks.org)

### Our Mission

*At Autism Speaks, our goal is to change the future for all who struggle with autism spectrum disorders. We are dedicated to funding global biomedical research into the causes, prevention, treatments, and cure for autism; to raising public awareness about autism and its effects on individuals, families, and society; and to bringing hope to all who deal with the hardships of this disorder.*

*The goal of the Nantucket Autism Speaks Resource Center is to lessen the isolation of individuals impacted by autism and their families. All of the Resource Center programs are open to individuals with any disability, not limited to autism, and their families.*

## Time to Get Started!

We hope this brochure provides your school community with the tools for a fun and enriching mentoring club that will benefit everyone involved.



## This is a Win-Win for Everyone!

### For the Individual with a Disability:

- develop friendships
- feel included and welcomed
- learn social skills
- benefit from appropriate role models
- participate in activities with peers

### For the Family:

- relief that their child isn't alone so much
- the knowledge that he is supervised and safe
- recruitment of babysitters and companions
- respite for the caretaker

### For the Mentor:

- a rich and rewarding, unforgettable experience
- opportunity for important life lessons: patience, acceptance of others' differences, realizing how alike we really are, and lending a helping hand when needed
- the acknowledgement that he/she is making a positive difference for someone else



*I became friends with kids that I would have never gotten to know.*

— Dave, Student

*I have been amazed at the compassion and responsibility our Club Members have shown for our "special" members*

— Mary, Teacher