

PLAYFAIR TEAMS:

AN Equity-Based Activity for Students with Disabilities & Their Typical Peers

There are a number of social activities designed to bring typical students and students with disabilities together in friendship manner. These activities have been successful in reaching this goal to various degrees. In Canada they have been adopted by a significant number of schools that have shown awareness of the social gulf existing between the two groups of students.

To the best knowledge of the Marsha Forest Centre the most known program in Canada is Best Buddies, an offshoot of Best Buddies International founded by Anthony Kennedy Shriver. The program is focused on intellectual disabilities and pairs students with disabilities with volunteer typical students. Interested typical students apply to join a Best Buddies Chapter. According to Best Buddies (User Guide. Member Edition), information is gathered on the interest and qualities of volunteers through written surveys. This information is then "used by Chapter Leadership" to decide which volunteer and which person with intellectual concerns would result in strong Buddie pair candidates" p. 6). Once a Best Buddies pair is established, the volunteer Best Buddie is responsible for submitting routine reports on the relationship. Ideas for possible activities are provided for the volunteers by the Chapter Leadership.

Those of us in the Marsha Forest Center congratulate those who formed the Best Buddies friendship strategy. The Best Buddies program has brought many volunteer students and students with disability together.

However, we find a number of limitations to the Best Buddies program.

- The program is focused on students with intellectual concerns. We believe that any program should be sufficiently flexible to include any student with a disability, not one particular type of disability.
- Natural friendship occurs when two people meet, find they like being together and decide to spend time together. According to the Best Buddies manual a Best Buddies team is chosen by the Chapter leadership on the basis of paper reports on the qualities and likes of the team members.
- The volunteer Buddie takes lead on when and where to meet and what to do. Having one person in the pair take a leadership role and being responsible for keeping and submitting reports on their activities is not natural to friendship.

Around the time Best Buddies strategy was developed the Marsha Forest Center was developing a friendship strategy based on Disability-Social Justice-Inclusion. The base is equity among both elementary and secondary students with and without disabilities, any type of disability and their peers without disability. Students with any type of disability can decide to join a PlayFair Team, as are all other students.

Equity is a crucial point. The programs of which we are aware are based on a charitable giver-receiver model between typical students (the givers) and students with disabilities (the receivers). So

long as we depend on a relationship based on the giver-receiver model, equity will not be achieved. Students with disabilities will remain on the fringes of school society. PlayFair Teams emphasizes that PlayFair Team members are all equal in contributing to the Team from their abilities and needs. There are no givers or and receivers in PlayFair Teams. Everyone is equal in deciding what their PlayFair Team decides to do on a Team.

There is no cost associated for the students or the schools. A Teacher Advisor is needed in the same way a teacher is needed to coach a school team or to lead any other co-curricular program. A PlayFair Team contributes to the school just the same as a track and field team, a choir or a band. The specific role of a PlayFairTeam is for students to work together in creating a presentation for the entertainment of other students and school staff in their and/or schools and communities. The Team conducts an activity to inform themselves and their audiences of issues of Disability-Social Justice-Inclusion at their own school, or at other schools and beyond.

If a PlayFair Team and their school choose to have a Team uniform, that would be their decision. The Marsha Forest Centre created a uniform design which can be made available. If any nation adopts PlayFair Teams, the uniform should be in the appropriate language and that all nations adopted the same colour scheme. Colour schemes are optional. We would be pleased to send photos.

Does PlayFair Teams have positive effect on the students involved? During our pilot phase we collected data on an elementary school audience attending a PlayFair Team presentation to a visiting elementary school. Data also was collected from secondary students on their experiences as PlayFair Team members. Data analysis provides evidence-based support of both the elementary and the secondary team. Excerpts from the data gathered from their experiences are presented next.

Research – Based Evidence of Effect of PlayFair Teams

Elementary School:

The following research presents evidence based on the responses of elementary students to a PlayFair Team presentation. These students were from a nearby school and had come to watch the presentation. The children's teacher advised them that they would discuss the presentation when they returned to their home school. Each student responded to 4 questions item questionnaire. The questions were:

- After watching the skits, what do you think PlayFair Team mean?
- Did you enjoy the skits (Circle Yes or No).
- What do you think one main message of the skits would be?
- What is one thing that you have learned by watching the skits?

Overall Categories of Response for Grade 3 and Grade 4 Students:

- Valuing individual equality
- Accepting difference
- Including others

- Not bullying others
- Treating others fairly
- Doing unto others
- Helping others
- Being nice and kind
- Being friendly
- Respecting others
- Teamwork

The student responses for the Valuing Individual Equality category are given below.

Responses to other categories are available for any interested schools.

Responses under Valuing Individual Equality (Grade 3 and 4 , ages 8 to 10):

- **Grade 3, nine year old.**
- I learned everybody has feelings.
- That if you don't know people, to still help them.
- That people with disabilities are normal like everyone else.
- Just because they're different doesn't mean there are stupid. Just try helping.
- Not to feel bad about myself just because we are all different.
- You can do many things people do even if you are different.
- You should be proud of who you are.
- I think it means it doesn't matter what you look like.
- Just because someone is disabled doesn't mean they are useless.

Grade 4, ten year old.

- I think the main point is that play fair is always right.
- I learned that it doesn't matter if she/he is popular or not. It's okay to just be someone's friend just like that.
- Just get around problems with your friends if they have a disability and change the games a little.
- I have learned, when I see a person that is blind whether it's a boy or girl, I help them play, and when they fall you help, and that is what I learned from watching the skits.
- No one is different. You are all the same.
- The main thing is when you're in Special Ed is not to feel that you are dumb.
- I learned to stand up to bullies.
- Make people happy, not sad.
- If someone is disabled they are still people like you.
- I learned that it does not matter who you are to do something.
- How it feels when anyone is hurt. Don't get mad easily. It really means to play fair.
- I think it means to be fair and share with people. While playing, be nice.
- If you are disabled or need special glasses, they shouldn't be treated differently.

Note: These responses were gathered from many students. The responses were grouped together as they all addressed issues of Valuing Individual Equality. Space does not allow presenting responses to all the other groupings of responses.

If you are interested in other groupings of responses, we would be glad to send them to you.

Secondary School

Information from Secondary School students was collected from students in a PlayFair Team. The students were asked to write their thoughts from the experience. Responses from typical students and students with disabilities were grouped under categories.

- Overall impact of experience
- Personal impact
- Meeting new friends
- Becoming a team
- Accepting all team members
- Significant lessons learned

Responses under Personal Impact (responses of PlayFair Team members with disabilities are marked by an asterisk.

Gregory* - It felt good to do some things that other students get to do.

Michelle – I loved telling other teachers and students about how much fun I was having as a member of the PlayFair Team.

Eleanor – Despite physical and mental disabilities, the special ed students are like an other teenagers. During the experience, we talked, play, laughed and cried. I've learned a little confidence in yourself goes a long way. The things I've learned about myself are lessons that'll stay with me for life.

Megan* - All my life, I was judged, put down and left out of things just because I am physically disabled, but, for once I'm not. In PlayFair, it gave me, as well as the others, an opportunity to meet people around the school and get to know them, people that probably wouldn't give us the time of day otherwise. I have gotten to know lots of kids and even made best friends of them. These specific people may not know this but they mean the world to me. I feel accepted and I'm no longer worrying about what the others think of me and my friends.

Alvaro – We have many great ideas and plans – we just need to put them into action. The fact that there are other schools out there working on the same issues and achieving successful results gives me motivation to continue.

Jennifer* – That day at Mary Ward High School changed my whole way of thinking about people with other disabilities. I did a complete 360 in my life.

Monika – To me, it has been one of the most enriching experiences in the whole life. I like finding meaning in everything I face, but being part of the PlayFair was absolutely distinctive. From an intimidated individual back then, I have turned into someone who can make a difference.

Sonia – Is that possible? To me the answer to that question seemed grim but when we arrived at Mary Ward and saw all those students just as we are, working together, it changed my whole point of view. Because now I truly believe that with presentations as powerful and inspiring as the one I was blessed with being able to witness that day, anyone could become enlightened and would understand the importance. As I do now.

Crystal * - I think each of us learned to get to know each other as individuals rather than judging the first thing we see.

Daniel * - When I saw and heard stories dealing with the acceptance of people with challenging needs, it made me realize that I could relate to them so much because of things I had gone through in my own life.

Note: Online and written additional information is available through the Marsha Forest Center for those interested.

Best Buddies International Program Manual, (2013).