

# **The Importance of Friendships: Thoughts about autism and relationships with normal peers**

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## **The Evolution of Taylor Crowe's "Circle of Friends"**

*As a young adult in his mid-twenties, Taylor asserts that friendships with normal peers were essential to him as a child in "learning how to be a kid," citing those relationships as critical in overcoming much of the influence of his autism. This is a brief description of how some of those relationships were fostered.*

Systematically involving children struggling with autism in activities with normal peers is not a new concept. Structured "Circle of Friends" programs have been in existence for many years. What Taylor's mother and I arranged for Taylor wasn't a "formal" Circle of Friends program; that's merely the name we chose to use. What we came up with for Taylor was based on our intuition.

In an effort to improve his social skills, we arranged for Taylor to attend kindergarten for two years in two separate schools. Wanting to include him in mainstream settings as much as possible, we then placed him in a regular first grade class largely because we wanted him to be challenged socially rather than isolated in a special education setting. It seemed the logical thing to do.

The first grade turned out to be extremely difficult for Taylor from the very first day when he came home in tears, saying between sobs, "I want to go 'poof!' I want to go 'poof' like in the cartoons! I just want to go 'poof' and disappear!!" He knew he didn't fit in and sensed that something was terribly wrong. Nonetheless, we persevered and kept him in the mainstream class, wanting to give it a little time and hoping that he would adjust. As the year progressed he excelled in spelling, did okay in math, but did poorly in anything involving language (which, when you consider it, is almost everything). We discovered that Taylor had problems focusing during class because every noise he heard competed equally for his attention. He also became subject to teasing in the classroom and on the playground. At the end of the year we opted for a self-contained second grade class. Again, it seemed the logical thing to do.

The self-contained class offered learning opportunities more suited to Taylor's specific needs but it was unavoidably socially isolating. As the second grade progressed, we worked to include him in mainstream activities both on the playground and in those

classroom settings we felt were appropriate for him. We found that he could attend certain mainstream classes for limited segments of time without being overwhelmed.

For the remainder of his years in elementary school, we worked to achieve a daily balance between self-contained and mainstream activities for Taylor. At the beginning of each school year (this was written into his IEP), Taylor's mother and I visited Taylor's mainstream class to give the kids a brief overview of what autism was like and how they could interact with him. We did this with Taylor out of the room and always felt that it helped increase the children's sensitivity toward his limitations as well as opening doors for him socially with his peers. The kids were fascinated when Taylor's mom would give them instructions in French and then feign exasperation when they didn't understand her. She explained that autism was similar; the autistic child heard the words but often didn't know what they meant. We talked about friends playing together and helping each other out, explaining to the children that in a sense *they* were becoming teachers: Taylor was always watching what they were doing in an effort to learn what he was supposed to do.

Balancing mainstream and special services programs seemed to hold promise for Taylor. By the fifth grade we sensed a need for even more social role modeling from his peers and felt that increased inclusion in regular classes would allow this. We consulted with the special services teacher who was his case manager for the coming year and worked with his mainstream fifth grade teacher to involve Taylor with other kids as much as possible. At that point in his life we believed that learning *social skills* was more important for Taylor than academics, so we began structuring increased social involvement for him.

Our concept of Taylor's "circle of friends" was simple: surround him with kids who cared about him, doing whatever kids his age do, while making sure the children knew how to interact with him. We found a way for the teachers and staff at his school to provide us the names of a handful of students (and their parents) that seemed to possess the maturity and sensitivity to make such a program work. We wanted a mix of boys and girls, and we wanted to involve the "class leaders," those students the other kids looked up to, because we wanted the rest of the children in the school to follow their lead.

Once we had a list of names, I contacted the parents and briefly explained what we had in mind over the phone. I arranged an evening meeting to go over the program in more detail.

Neither Taylor nor the other kids were at the meeting. Taylor's mom and I visited with the parents and discussed the basics of autism and the challenges it presented. We explained that their children had been identified as "class leaders" recognized as responsible, mature kids capable of understanding Taylor's needs. We described that we were looking for classmates who would be comfortable including him in some of their activities and willing to do things with Taylor on weekends, over holidays and at other times outside of school. We also explained that Taylor's special services teacher would be working with the classroom teacher to involve their children in specific situations and

projects at school. We detailed situations where the kids might occasionally be “pulled out” of the mainstream class (with their teacher’s approval) to work with Taylor. I explained that even though this program was designed to help Taylor, we believed it would also teach the other children about empathy, caring, and how people with handicaps can have a place in their lives. For those parents who remained interested, we scheduled a second meeting that included their kids.

The second meeting gave us a chance to explain to the children that it was an honor for them to be chosen to participate in this program, how proud we were of them and how much fun it was going to be. We briefly discussed strategies for interacting with Taylor, the things he enjoyed doing and what they should do if problems arose. As we had arranged, Taylor then showed up and the meeting essentially became a “mixer” for Taylor and the kids to hang out together for half an hour or so. Taylor’s structured friendship program had its beginning.

## **A Few Things for Parents to Consider**

Almost two decades after first trying this, here is my advice for parents regarding a “structured friendship” concept for a child with autism:

1. Establishing and maintaining the group is the *parents’* responsibility. Most of the activities occur after school hours and no one knows the child as well as the parents. Furthermore, the work involved takes a level of commitment that can only be expected of a parent. However, the teachers and/or paraprofessionals involved are critical to the success of the program. The school staff chosen to work with the group must be involved because they *want to be involved*, not merely because the program has been assigned to them. The *levels of enthusiasm and commitment* from parents *and* teaching professionals must be very high.
2. The input and commitment of the teachers, paraeducators and school staff is essential to the success of the program and they need to hear about the great work they are doing. A teacher once told me I was the only parent who had thanked her for *anything* in over a year! Taylor’s seventh grade principal asserted that I was the only “special needs” parent who had ever said anything positive to him about his school’s work. Parents of special needs children who express gratitude rather than treating what the school does for their children as an entitlement seem to be rare.
3. A parent needs a fairly thick skin, resilience and a lot of energy to keep a structured friendship program going. You can’t take things personally. Kids will come and go, commit and forget, fail to follow through, make mistakes or sometimes misunderstand things. This is part of what goes on. After all, they’re kids! They’re in the process of growing up, too!

4. Know the education laws. It's part of your responsibility as a parent. The school can do many things for you and your child, but don't expect it to teach you all you need to know about the laws pertaining to your child's education. That's *not* the school's job.
5. For a structured friendship program to work, the child with autism needs to be in a mainstream setting a reasonable amount of time *every single school day*. Having tried this program in a totally "self-contained" special needs environment as well as in a setting that blended special needs classes with mainstream classes, we learned this very important fact: mainstream kids need to spend significant time *in mainstream situations* with an autistic child for meaningful interactions to occur.
6. The child's "circle of friends" doesn't stop with kids from school. Church youth groups and Sunday School were also excellent sources of peers to be involved with Taylor. He also attended Saturday art lessons in a program provided by a local university, which capitalized on his interest in art. During his grade school years we found a Little League baseball coach who was very sensitive to the struggles autism presented because he had an autistic nephew. The coach added Taylor to his team and for three summers Taylor had a vastly enlarged group of buddies he could hang out with. Some of those teammates remain good friends with Taylor to this day. By the way, we "trained" his teammates to interact with Taylor in virtually the same way we oriented his mainstream classmates in grade school: at the start of the first day of practice, the coach and I met with the kids and explained things to them. Ten or fifteen minutes later, when Taylor drove up with his mom, he was welcomed into the group by a bunch of boys who were really looking forward to meeting him.
7. Be *consistent and persistent*. It's not an exaggeration to say that doing this takes boundless energy and commitment. Don't forget to praise all the people (adults *and* kids) who help you. *Don't forget!* Make a resolution to thank at least one person who works with your child every day.
8. The size of the structured friendship program doesn't have to be huge. A "core" of three or four kids is plenty if they're the right children. Oftentimes Taylor would end up doing things with just one other child; this situation eventually became much more common than "group activities."
9. Lots of things don't work and become a waste of time. Identify them and move on. Don't waste additional time worrying about them.
10. We live in an imperfect world, but this is no excuse for not *trying* to make it as perfect as possible for your child.

11. Discover your child's interests and abilities and zero in on them. These interests can become great social skills, and with time, other interests and abilities may develop.
12. Don't forget this either: make life *joyful*! This is incredibly important. Too many handicapped kids have sad, joyless existences. They deserve all they can get from life and all the happiness that goes along with it.

I hope this helps. Thanks for your interest!

David Crowe