

**Mothers & More and
the Framingham Special Education Parent Advisory Council (F-SEPAC)
present
“Building Compassion”**

How to talk to your children about disabilities.

How to support families of children with special needs.

Mothers & More is a non-profit organization dedicated to improving the lives of mothers through support, education and advocacy. We address mothers' needs as individuals and members of society, and promote the value of all the work mothers do. For more information about the Framingham Area Chapter or this discussion meeting, visit our web site at www.mothersandmoreframingham.com or call 1-866-293-9108.

F-SEPAC's mission is to work for the understanding, respect, and support of all children with special needs in Framingham. We provide opportunities for parents to share experiences/information and come together to learn more about challenges facing special needs children. Visit our web site at www.f-sepac.org

Talking to kids about disabilities

It is normal for kids to have questions about others whom they perceive as being different. There is no better time to teach your child that people with disabilities must be perceived as people first. By talking to kids, you can help them to better understand the differences and to foster relationships with children with disabilities.

Here are a few suggestions:

Explain to kids that just as there are kids with different racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, all kids have different kinds and levels of abilities. Some kids can run faster than anyone else in their class; others are unable to walk and may use a wheelchair. Some kids win spelling bees or math contests; others learn differently than their peers. Some kids sing solos in a school concert; others may not hear or be able to talk.

Everybody is just a little bit different, all of us. We are all special in many ways, yet we all have difficulties that we must deal with in our lives. Persons with disabilities are often challenged by physical problems that keep them from seeing, or hearing, or walking while others have disabilities that you can't even see.

Encourage kids to think about their own unique abilities and differences. What things are they good at, and what things are difficult for them to do? How would they like other kids to treat them as a result of those differences? Ask the kids to think about the unique abilities and gifts that other kids have to offer, including kids with disabilities.

Even though persons with disabilities may look or act a little bit different from you, they are very much like you inside. A kid in a wheelchair likes to play just as much as you do. A kid who can't see appreciates a warm sunny day, just as you do. Kids with disabilities want to be treated the same way you do. They don't want people to stare at them, or treat them any differently than you would want to be treated. Are people with disabilities special? Sure they are, just as you are very special, too.

Sometimes things we don't understand frighten us. You may find yourself uncomfortable talking to someone who can't see you. You may not know how to hug a person in a wheelchair. Ask if it's okay to hug that person. Tell them how you feel and offer to be their friend. Try to remember that the person is just like you in every other way, and would very much like to be your friend.

When adults help facilitate communication and understanding between kids with and without disabilities, they may be amazed at how accepting children can be and how quickly friendships can grow.

Encourage your children to get to know a classmate/neighbor with a disability as they would any other classmate/neighbor. If they have questions about the child's disability, encourage them to ask the child first, then a parent/teacher to help their understanding. It is better for kids to ask open and honest questions than to simply ignore a child who is different. No child wants to feel left out or have others act as if they aren't there.

Understanding the power of language and labels

When we misuse words, we reinforce the barriers created by negative and stereotypical attitudes. For too long, labels have been used to define the value and potential of people who are labeled. It's important to think about the person first and that the disability is not *who* they are. Here are a few examples of how to talk about disabilities:

Say	Instead of
she needs/ uses/ has ...	she is ...
people with disabilities	the handicapped or disabled
he has a cognitive disability	he is mentally retarded
she has autism	she is autistic
she has a learning disability	she is learning disabled
he has a physical disability	he is a quadriplegic/crippled
he has an emotional disability	he is emotionally disturbed
she uses a wheelchair or mobility chair	she is wheelchair bound
he receives special ed services	he is in special education
typical kids/ kids without disabilities	normal or healthy kids
congenital disability	birth defect
brain injury	brain damaged

When your child meets a child with disabilities it is important to...

- ▶ Listen to the child's questions.
- ▶ Take stock of your feelings towards the situation because your child will pick up on your emotions whether you voice them or not.
- ▶ View the situation from the child's perspective.
- ▶ Be truthful, keeping your answers age-appropriate. Often the parents of the special needs child can answer questions in a thoughtful way since have dealt with these kinds of inquiries before.
- ▶ Satisfy a child's curiosity. Let the child talk to the child or sit in a wheelchair, for example.
- ▶ Stress the positive. For example, use of a wheelchair enhances mobility.

Kids with special needs are not really different; they just need extra help doing certain tasks. Some of your best friends might have special needs, and you can learn a lot by talking to these friends and asking them questions.

Making friends with a child with special needs...

If a friend feels depressed about his special needs, give him your time and listen to his feelings and thoughts.

Help friends or classmates who have physical needs by asking if you can push their wheelchair or get their school supplies if they can't do so themselves. Remind kids to make sure to ask their friend with a disability before helping them do things. Most kids with disabilities want to do as much for themselves as possible.

Remember to treat your friend with special needs just like you would your other friends. Invite your friend to have pizza or go to the mall with you.

You can also help kids with special needs by learning more about what their specific need is and being positive. Having a positive attitude, combined with enthusiasm for getting to know others is catching. Everyone benefits from a positive attitude!

As you grow up, you'll meet lots of people in this world with different needs and special gifts. You'll be sure to learn a lot from being around people who are different than you are and who can share their experiences with you. It could be a beginning of a terrific friendship for both of you!

Teaching Typical Kids How to Play with Developmentally Delayed Peers by Kristyn Crow

Most neuro-typical children love to be "helpers," and they make very good teachers to their peers. The more exposure the special needs child has to other kids his own age, and the more age-appropriate interactions that take place between them, the better.

Although typical children like helping each other, they may need some instruction in what they are supposed to do. Play is something they have always done without much thought; it just comes naturally.

So how do they teach a peer to play? Take some time to explain to the child/ren how to do this. There are five basic skills they need to know.

- ▶ Get your friend's attention.
- ▶ Share a toy.
- ▶ Show your friend how to play with the toy.
- ▶ Take turns playing with it.
- ▶ Talk to your friend with kind, simple words.

What you can do, as a parent, to facilitate a good peer-play experience:

- ▶ Prepare a fun activity, like playdough and cookie cutters, or paper boats in a shallow container of water.
- ▶ Explain to the peer/s what skill you'd like to teach your child (shaping the dough into a ball, folding the boats and making water waves, etc.).
- ▶ Demonstrate the skill to the peer.
- ▶ Allow the peer to practice the skill.
- ▶ Bring your child to participate, allowing the peer to teach the skill. Watch from a distance, giving infrequent gentle guidance or suggestions.
- ▶ Encourage turn taking.
- ▶ Give a special reward and praise to the peer for being an excellent teacher.

Ways of supporting a parent of a child with special needs

As a friend/ family member, you can support the parents of a child with special needs by seeing if they are doing some of the things listed below.

Make sure you are getting support for yourself and your family and become fully informed about your child's needs.

Add some fun and enjoyment in your life -- alone and with your partner. If you worry too much about leaving your child with someone else, take your beeper or cell phone.

It helps to be as active as you are comfortable being in your community as a whole and in the special education community in particular.

Exercise -- almost any form of exercise will lift your sagging spirits if you do a form of exercise that you enjoy and do it regularly.

Journaling -- writing down thoughts and feelings and experiences is helpful for many of us trying to put things into perspective.

Support groups -- It is often helpful to share experiences, thoughts and feelings with others who are "in the same boat" and can understand.

Break problems down into more manageable pieces. Things can sometimes get overwhelming.

Seek professional guidance when necessary. It is not a sign of weakness to seek help when you need it. On the contrary it is wise to think of your needs as well as those of your children.

A great online resource for parents of special needs children is www.nichcy.org/pubs/newsdig/nd20txt.htm