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Good Friend Combats Disability Harassment Before It Starts

WAUKESHA, WI — Good Friend, Inc., a non-profit whose purpose is to create autism awareness, teach acceptance, and foster empathy for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), is on a mission to eliminate disability harassment.

“It’s a lofty goal,” says co-founder Denise Schamens, herself a mother of a son with ASD. “But we believe that children, given the proper social foundation, are capable and willing to be good friends to children of all abilities.”

And in the elementary schools where Schamens and her business partner Chelsea Budde have delivered their Awareness-Acceptance-Empathy® message to thousands of students, they may well be able to stop bullying before the tendencies start. But how do they plan to eradicate this form of harassment?

“Children often tease peers with differences because they don’t understand them,” Budde, who has two children with ASD, states. “Our contention is that if we teach the peers they’re all different in their own ways, and differences are wonderful intrinsically, they’ll begin to see children with ASD in a softer light.” This is the empathy light Schamens and Budde have been turning on.

Good Friend’s Peer Sensitivity Workshops are designed to be tailored to the K-5th grade classroom dynamics of an individual child with an ASD. Schamens and Budde correspond, with proper consent, with the entire care team of the student with an ASD in order to get an idea of the child’s strengths, personality, behaviors, and challenges. Then, by combining the grade level specific curriculum with the knowledge of the child, Good Friend spends anywhere from 30 to 60 minutes interacting with the child’s peer group.

Budde insists the result can be magical. “When I first did this presentation with my son’s second grade class, one of the children said to me hours later, ‘Mrs. Budde, we’re all fighting over who gets to play with Justus on lunch recess today!’ That is what this is all about.”

Schamens knows disability harassment is no child’s play, though. She cites a 2000 letter the U.S. Department of Education distributed to teachers and administrators which explains the term in the following manner:

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“Disability harassment ... is intimidation or abusive behavior toward a student based on disability that creates a hostile environment by interfering with or denying a student’s participation in or receipt of benefits, services, or opportunities in the institution’s program. Harassing conduct may take many forms, including verbal acts and namecalling, as well as nonverbal behavior, such as graphic and written statements, or conduct that is physically threatening, harmful, or humiliating.”

The primary way the Department of Education proposes eliminating this problem is by “creating a campus environment that is aware of disability concerns and sensitive to disability harassment, [and] weaving these issues into the curriculum or programs outside the classroom.” Good Friend’s autism Peer Sensitivity Workshop does just that. By exposing “the hidden curriculum” that Brenda Smith Myles and her co-authors (Melissa L. Trautman and Ronda L. Schelvan) refer to in their book of the same title, Peer Sensitivity Workshops level the social playing field.

Studies demonstrate that consequences for ignoring the potential for unfriendly behavior go beyond classroom walls and playground boundaries. According to the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, “Children who are bullied experience real suffering that can interfere with their social and emotional development, as well as their school performance. Some victims of bullying have even attempted suicide rather than continue to endure such harassment and punishment.”

“A child with autism spectrum disorder is still a child who needs to feel loved, cared for, and secure,” says Schamens. “We know that children want to be friends with one another. They just need to be taught how.”

Good Friend has expanded its services to the middle school level. Grades 6-8 now have their own Individual Classroom Presentation and general student assembly.

For more information regarding Good Friend, visit www.goodfriendinc.com, or call 414-510-0385.

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